

The Value of State Service Commissions

Executive Summary

Introduction

The purpose of this evaluation is to explore the value that state service commissions bring to their states. The evaluation was conducted in partnership with the America's Service Commissions (ASC), and five state service commissions. The participating commissions include ServeOhio, OneStar Foundation (TX), Oregon Volunteers, SerVermont, and UServeUtah. The evaluation sought data to answer the following research questions:

Question 1: What is the value that commissions bring to their states?

Question 2: What are the key catalysts of commissions' impact?

The evaluation focused on six common areas of intended impact identified by the commissions.

1. AmeriCorps program leaders deliver efficient and effective service programs.
2. AmeriCorps program leaders deepen and expand their program's impact.
3. AmeriCorps program leaders create meaningful and productive member experiences.
4. Social sector leaders develop the capacity to effectively engage volunteers and national service members.
5. Public officials become champions for service and volunteerism.
6. AmeriCorps members develop habits of civic engagement.

Evaluation Methods

To answer the research questions, the evaluators from Dialogues In Action designed a convergent mixed method outcome evaluation to explore the effects that each of the participating commissions has had on three populations: 1) AmeriCorps program leaders, 2)

nonprofit and volunteer service organization leaders, and 3) public officials. The evaluators conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with a sample from these populations in each state and administered an online survey to gather quantitative data from these populations. The evaluators then identified findings for each commission from the data. The findings in this report result from a metasynthesis of the qualitative findings and analysis of aggregated quantitative data from the five commissions.

Findings About Commissions' Impact

This first section of findings highlights insights about impact that prove the value of commissions' work in their states. The data reveal that commissions make a significant impact on AmeriCorps program leaders and their programs as well as on the broader social sector in their states.

Impact on AmeriCorps Leaders and Programs

1. Helping AmeriCorps programs navigate complexity

The data show that commissions' training and support help AmeriCorps program leaders understand complex national service requirements and make better decisions to promote program compliance and quality. This helps leaders in a variety of ways including

- **Reducing risk.** Commissions' training and technical assistance helps leaders mitigate risk. This reduces the fear associated with noncompliance and enables leaders to deliver more effective service.
- **Providing relevant resources.** Commissions' understanding of the internal and external context in which programs operate enables them to provide support that is relevant and responsive.
- **Highlighting strengths and challenges.** Leaders value the monitoring commissions provide to provide deeper insight into their programs' strengths and areas for improvement.

2. Humanizing compliance to help AmeriCorps leaders and programs evolve

The data reveal that commissions' relational approach creates openness and trust that help leaders establish a foundation of compliance and build upon that to accomplish more strategic goals. Leaders feel both accountable and encouraged, as though they are not alone in the challenges they face. They are more likely to share challenges enabling commissions and programs to work together to address issues proactively. This supports leaders by

- **Developing confidence to improve program quality.** The strong relationships between commissions and programs helps to reduce leaders' fear and believe in their ability to do more.
- **Embracing continuous improvement.** Leaders are better able to recognize challenges and opportunities and strategically adapt to changing circumstances because of commissions.

The survey data also show that programs are becoming more effective and impactful (see Figure 3).

3. Building capacity for impact, innovation, and sustainability

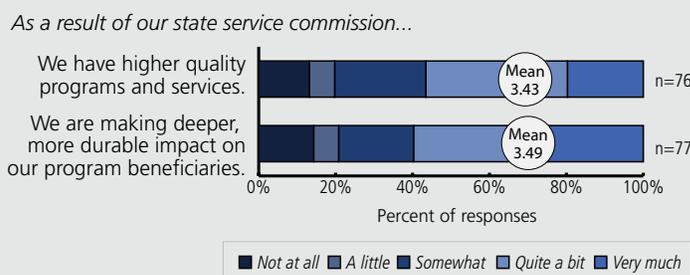
The data show that commissions' support enables AmeriCorps programs to experiment, broadens the scope and scale of their work, and promotes long-term organizational health. The resources commissions provide help leaders improve policies and systems within their programs that lead to overall quality improvements. Once these policies and systems are in place and leaders feel secure with their program's operations, they can focus on being more strategic and impactful to promote the long-term sustainability of their programs. This capacity is essential for

- **Promoting operational excellence.** Leaders are better able to recognize their programs' strengths and envision its success in meeting its goals.
- **Seeing the bigger picture.** The data reveal that commissions help to elevate programs' gaze above day-to-day operations and connect them to the bigger picture of service, which enables leaders to make more strategic decisions and prioritize more effectively.
- **Illuminating trends.** Commissions help AmeriCorps program leaders identify trends in their states and nationally. This ensures that leaders can proactively prepare to meet future needs and challenges.
- **Supporting sustainability.** The policies, procedures, and practices that programs develop with commissions' training and support enable them to more efficiently and effectively use resources. The grant application review process also supports programs' fundraising success nationally and locally.

“I am no longer thinking about our program as something static. The commission has been able to keep us thinking about how we are continuously improving operations. They keep us informed about what the future holds, what the risks there are, where our funding is going to come from, what the challenges are within the community, or the people and places that we serve. I think that is something that I have definitely benefited from.”

– AmeriCorps program leader

Figure 3. AmeriCorps programs are becoming more effective and impactful.



Impact on the Social Sector and Communities

The findings that follow focus on commissions' impact beyond AmeriCorps on the social sector more broadly.

4. Improving the state's ability to understand and meet community needs

The data reveal that commissions are connectors between on-the-ground community needs and state and federal government resources. Rural communities, in particular, see commissions as their ally and partner to help them access much-needed resources.

- **Deep local knowledge builds trust.** Leaders value commissions' unique understanding of local context and active engagement in program and community events. This knowledge and engagement set commissions apart from other state government entities and engender trust.
- **Infusing energy and ideas into communities.** The human resources that commissions bring to their states are highly valued by social sector leaders. This includes AmeriCorps and VISTA members as well as commission staff themselves.
- **Building capacity for impact.** Community organizations are able to do more and come together to better serve their communities because of the resources and support commissions provide. Leaders recognized that their organization's ability to work more effectively catalyzed more effective work in the organizations they partner with as well. This was particularly true for commissions that serve as VISTA intermediaries.

5. Developing the next generation of social sector leaders

The data show that commissions are supporting the development of AmeriCorps members into the next generation of leaders for the social sector. AmeriCorps program leaders, nonprofit sector leaders, and public officials alike recognize the value of the training and experience that AmeriCorps members receive through both the direct training commissions provide and the support they provide to programs to promote high-quality member development. This function of commissions is especially critical given the significant turnover predicted in the nonprofit sector in the next five years.

- **Building professional skills.** Commissions provide a broad range of development opportunities for AmeriCorps members that are widely recognized for building critical professional skills for members during their service year and beyond.
- **Cultivating engaged citizens.** Leaders recognize the value of cultivating a strong desire to be engaged in communities coupled with the skills to take action on behalf of communities as critical to organizations, communities and society.

“The untapped potential of AmeriCorps members is tremendous. They are so transformed by their experience. They go into something mission driven. They bring understanding of people and needs. They bring that experience to enrich whatever they do moving forward. When you add it all up, the resources leveraged to make a difference is enormous.”

– Public official

6. Enriching nonprofit culture and practices

The data reveal that organizations that sponsor AmeriCorps programs receive significant auxiliary benefits from their AmeriCorps program's work with commissions. The training and support that AmeriCorps program staff receive coupled with the grant management training and support that sponsor organization and host site staff receive, create stronger policies and practices for organizations. This professional support develops the skills of staff organization-wide and promotes the sustainability of the organization.

- Improving training organization-wide.** Training that commissions provide adds relevant content to sponsor organizations' training for staff throughout the organization.
- Improving management practices.** Many management practices required or encouraged by commissions have been adopted broadly throughout sponsor organizations. Leaders cited human resources and partner relationships as areas where these practices were especially helpful.
- Thinking more strategically.** Commissions' statewide vantage point gives enables them to see work happening across the state and how it connects together. This enables the organizations commissions partner with to be able to put their work in perspective and identify the intersections with work occurring elsewhere locally, regionally, and nationally.
- Promoting organizational sustainability.** The policies, procedures, and practices that commissions help organizations to develop for AmeriCorps and volunteer programs also elevate quality throughout the organization, enabling the organization to more efficiently and effectively use its resources.

The survey data also show that AmeriCorps State member host sites and AmeriCorps VISTA host sites are significantly increasing their capacity and capability (see Figure 6 and 7).

7. Building bridges to strengthen collaboration

The data reveal that commissions play a critical role in connecting and convening people that promotes more effective collaboration and results in more effective action. They are seen as bridge builders within communities as well as within their states bringing together groups that normally would not come together because of the opportunities they offer and the common vision of service they represent.

- Bringing people together.** Leaders value the connections and partnerships that commissions help to create in communities. These connections help communities to more effectively address needs by ensuring that organizations are able to leverage their strengths and fill gaps through collaboration.
- Convening builds community.** Leaders value commissions' regional and statewide conferences, training, meetings and planning sessions for connecting and exchanging information with their peers.

"I think one role the commission plays is trying to heal some of that competition between nonprofits. They are getting groups to work together and recognizing outstanding projects and work of the nonprofit sector through philanthropy and other things. The commission's role is helping people problem solve so that everyone gets what they need to do the good work."

– Public employee

Figure 6. AmeriCorps member host sites significantly increase their capacity.

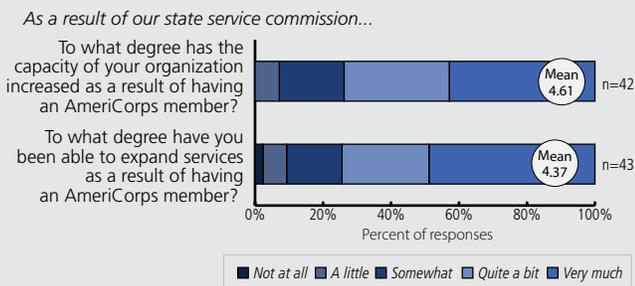
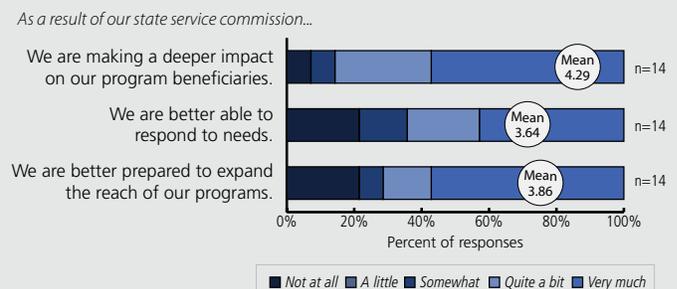


Figure 7. AmeriCorps VISTA host sites are increasing their capability to deepen and expand their impact.



Findings About the Potential for Greater Impact

This second section of findings provides insights about areas where there is potential for greater impact or where gaps in impact have been identified. These findings are intended to improve the value of commissions' work.

8. Place greater emphasis on elevating national service and volunteerism

Leaders desire for commissions to play a greater role in elevating the value of national service and volunteerism in their states. Interviewees recognized that commissions' place in state government, statewide reach, and vantage point to see across the sector give them a unique ability to communicate the value of national service and volunteerism in the state. Yet, they also recognized that these strengths have not been put to use to raise awareness of national service and volunteerism to the degree that many leaders had hoped.

- **Highlighting the impact of service and volunteerism.** Leaders expressed how valuable it would be for them to have their commission raising awareness of the impact of national service and volunteerism and highlighting the myriad benefits to their state.
- **Building awareness about commissions.** Leaders recognized that commissions themselves should be more widely known to ensure the commissions' success and sustainability. This would have ripple effects for programs as well.

9. Strike a better balance between ensuring compliance and supporting impact and innovation

Leaders are concerned that some commission requirements are unnecessary and undermine program quality and sustainability. Overly stringent AmeriCorps rules are burdensome and can limit leaders' ability to adapt and sustain their programs. The staff time and capacity it takes to maintain compliance takes away from program quality and limits opportunities for improvement, innovation, and expansion. This is especially concerning to leaders when additional

commission requirements are added on top of already burdensome AmeriCorps requirements.

- **Increasing risk.** Leaders are concerned about overly burdensome requirements because they want to run high-quality programs and they want to make whatever changes they need to make well. Last-minute changes or requests put programs at greater risk of making a mistake or not implementing a change as effectively as possible.
- **Compromising quality.** While some leaders focus on the risk associated with the potential financial cost of noncompliance, others focus on the opportunity cost. They are concerned about the time they have to take away from other aspects of running a high-quality program to meet requirements.
- **Undercutting common standards.** To streamline and standardize compliance across multi-state programs, AmeriCorps National program leaders seek greater clarity on what is required by commissions and what is required by CNCS.
- **Impeding innovation and impact.** Leaders are concerned that AmeriCorps is not sustainable because of the undue burden of compliance. This impedes programs' ability to partner with new host sites and have a more expansive impact in their community, particularly in rural communities where organizations have very limited capacity.

"It is difficult when new things come out and need to be implemented right away. There can be damage from change that is not done well because we do not have the time to think it through to mitigate errors."

– AmeriCorps program leader

10. Reduce barriers to equitable and inclusive service and volunteerism

Leaders see a need for changes in national service and volunteerism requirements to better enable their programs to support individuals, organizations and communities that can benefit most from national service. They see commissions as their ally in this work and desire for commissions to be stronger advocates with CNCS and state agencies to promote policies and priorities that enable programs to be more equitable and inclusive. Addressing these systemic barriers will allow programs to more

effectively engage and serve the state's most vulnerable citizens and communities.

- **Unlivable AmeriCorps living allowance.** The low cost per member service year that AmeriCorps grantees receive and the consequent low member living allowance that they can provide was cited as a significant barrier to having a corps that reflects the communities they serve.
- **Unrealistic AmeriCorps recruitment and retention requirements.** Along with the challenges of the AmeriCorps member living allowance, AmeriCorps program leaders also struggle to create a diverse and inclusive corps while meeting stringent requirements for member recruitment and retention.
- **Onerous match, fiscal, and administrative requirements.** Leaders see the tremendous opportunity that AmeriCorps provides to organizations and members, yet they also recognize that many organizations are turned away by the upfront costs, workload, and risk.

11. Play a more significant role in building the capacity of the social sector

Leaders see the potential for using commissions' capacity-building expertise as a resource to help fill capacity and capability gaps in the nonprofit sector. This would result in organizations being able to take advantage of the opportunities AmeriCorps and volunteerism present to further build their capacity while benefiting individuals and communities throughout the state.

- **Expanding impact throughout organizations.** Leaders desire for commissions to provide greater support to the organization beyond the AmeriCorps program to help bring them along and build internal support for the commission's recommendations and requirements.
- **Lack of capacity to host AmeriCorps members.** Limited organizational capability and capacity impedes the ability of AmeriCorps programs to partner with organizations in parts of their states that have the greatest need.
- **Limited data collection and management capacity.** One of the most significant capacity gaps that leaders identified is the limited ability to collect and manage data. Given the importance of data collection and management to secure grants and report progress, additional support in this area would be a tremendous benefit to the sector.

- **Lack of volunteer management capacity and experience.** Leaders value the training and support that some commissions provide for volunteerism in their states and would like to see this expanded.
- **Build support networks for leaders.** Leaders value commissions' training and other convenings as an opportunity for peer exchange and learning. They saw commissions as uniquely suited to help create these kinds of opportunities for peer networking so peers can support each other.

Findings About Approach

This section discusses the causes and catalysts of commissions' impact that were revealed through the data and the lessons that can be learned about what made these approaches effective.

12. Developing strong, supportive relationships

The data reveal that one of the most significant factors contributing to commissions' impact is the strong relationships commission staff have developed with grantees, partners, and community members. These strong relationships promote trust that enables commissions and programs to more proactively recognize and address issues. They also help to bring community members together to achieve their goals.

13. Customizing support to meet programs' needs

The interview data show that one of the most programs value the unique and deep knowledge commission staff bring to their work. This knowledge provides comfort and camaraderie to program leaders and helps them feel supported in their work.

14. Providing valuable training and resources

The value of the training and resources that commissions provide was evident throughout the data. Leaders described being better able to do their job because of the professional development and support that their commission provides. This was especially important given that many leaders have limited funding and capacity to seek professional development elsewhere.

15. Strengthening support networks

Leaders deeply value the connections and camaraderie they have developed with their peers that have been promoted and supported by their commission. Commissions create an environment that promotes support and builds community despite the fact that programs are often competing for limited funding and resources.

16. Purposeful convening

Commissions' role as a convener brings people together to build community and share resources. Leaders spoke about a variety of commission convenings they valued for learning, connecting, and exchanging information with their peers.

17. Promoting stability and sustainability

The interviews revealed that commissions' support is also contributing to the stability and sustainability of organizations. The policies, procedures, and practices that commissions help programs develop elevate quality throughout the organization, enabling the organization to more efficiently and effectively use its resources.

Areas for improvement in approach

This section discusses challenges that have arisen related to commissions' strategies and the lessons that can be learned about what can be more effective.

18. Ensure consistency and continuity

Given the important role that commissions play and value that they bring to AmeriCorps programs and the social sector, it is not surprising that transition of staff at the commission level has proven to be very disruptive. Leaders spoke of the importance of staff consistency due to the complexity of AmeriCorps regulations and the uniqueness of programs.

19. Provide clarity and transparency

AmeriCorps program leaders expressed concern about the risk posed by getting conflicting or inaccurate information from their commission. Some described information coming from their commission that did not seem to align with guidance provided by CNCS. Others

described getting guidance from the commission and beginning to implement it only to change direction because they received conflicting guidance later. AmeriCorps program leaders also emphasized the importance of understanding why policies or decisions were being made to help them better understand how to implement them more effectively.

20. Level the learning curve

AmeriCorps program leaders universally described the steep learning curve they faced when they started in their role. They appreciate all that their commission does to help build their understanding of AmeriCorps requirements and their role in implementing them, yet they also desire a better system of training and support for new program leaders to get up-to-speed quickly and systematically including upfront training a comprehensive "how to" manual.

"In my estimation, it took me 5-7 years to really get this job. Probably two full grant cycles. If I am ever going to leave my role, I need to think about how to ensure my program is strong and sustainable with that kind of learning curve for someone new. How can you plan for that? And how can the commission help to ease that transition, so the learning curve is not so steep?"

— AmeriCorps program leader

21. Promote peer-to-peer learning and collaboration

Leaders recognize that commissions have a unique vantage point that enables them to see what works and what does not across programs. They also value the network of support and expertise among their peers. Many leaders would like to see commissions promoting and supporting more formal and informal regional meetings to cultivate networks and share resources.

22. Collect, codify and share best practices and exemplars

Leaders desire a central repository of resources that are collected, vetted by the commission, and shared among programs. They desire for the commission to provide model policies and document templates to reduce the administrative burden, avoid duplication, and more effectively and efficiently ensure compliance. They would also like commissions to support the sharing of member training content between programs.

Recommendations

This section provides possible recommendations based on the data that can be explored to sustain and deepen the impact of commissions moving forward.

Shifts in strategy

A. Shifting from conveners and connectors to movement builders

The data reveal that commissions can capitalize on their strength as conveners and connectors in their states to build a movement for national service and volunteerism. Movement building is a process for bringing people together around a common issue or interest. It involves building trust and cohesion among people and building capacity and leadership in the group to create social change. If commissions became movement builders, it could unleash tremendous potential and create a culture where service is part of who we are and what we do to solve our state's and country's most pressing challenges.

“What would be ideal is if the commission were a connector between national service throughout the state. Bringing together and having eyes on AmeriCorps members and alums, Senior Corps, VISTA and NCCC. They could create points of connection throughout the year that would make sure we do not lose sight of the larger national service community. It would support peer-to-peer learning among programs. Organizing site visits so we can see what others are doing on the ground.”

– AmeriCorps program leader

B. Shifting from providing valuable training to becoming sector-wide capacity builders

The data reveal that commissions provide valuable training and technical assistance to AmeriCorps grantees, sponsor organizations and volunteer service organizations. Leaders see a greater role for commissions in building the capacity of the social sector more broadly, and particularly in rural and underserved communities. This shift would contribute to a stronger social sector and more organizations using service and volunteers to fulfill their missions and meet community needs.

C. Shifting from creating a state service plan to employing service as a cohesive and collaborative strategy for statewide impact

The data reveal that commissions can play a larger role in developing statewide strategy and facilitating collaboration to solve states' toughest challenges. This would enable commissions to develop stronger and more strategic partnerships, fund innovative programs targeted at priority issues, and drive impact.

D. Shifting from being experts in compliance to becoming incubators for innovation

The data reveal that commissions can strengthen AmeriCorps programs and the nonprofit sector at large by investing in and supporting ongoing program development, experimentation, and expansion. This has the potential to create programs that are tied to local needs rather than national priorities; create more opportunities for people to serve in different issue areas; and expand opportunities for rural and grassroots programming.

Shifts in strategy

E. Shift from monitoring to mentoring

To support continuous improvement and innovation, it will be important for commissions to adjust their approach from a primary focus on compliance to a primary focus on supporting leaders' and organizations' development. This shift will enable leaders to develop the skills required to run a high-quality, compliant program and also create a support system to promote ongoing experimentation and evolution.

F. Shift from managing complexity to pushing toward simplicity

AmeriCorps program leaders recognized commissions for their ability to help them navigate complexity. Yet to ensure the success, stability, and sustainability of these programs, it will behoove commissions and AmeriCorps programs to simplify and streamline requirements to the extent possible. Simplifying requirements will enable leaders to shift their focus from compliance to impact and innovation. It will also free commissions up to provide more support to AmeriCorps programs and the social sector at large.

G. Shift from duty to advocacy

The current focus of many commissions, understandably, is on their obligation to CNCS and the necessity of meeting federal requirements. This places the state commissions in posture of responding to the priorities and processes of CNCS. In turn, CNCS is understandably focused on fulfilling the statutes required of them. This influences the frames of mind for those leading the state commissions, orienting them toward to obligation and duty of fulfilling requirements. If state commissions could also embrace the potential influence they have nationally, to speak and advocate for their states and the organizations within their states, there could be a potentially helpful and convincing voice from the states which might influence national policy, not simply respond to national policy.

