



The Great Public-Service Talent Search

Using National Service to Grow and Develop Human Resources for Antipoverty Programs and Other Public Needs

Joy Moses and Shirley Sagawa February 2013

Introduction and summary

At this critical time, as public-service agencies—government at all levels and nonprofit organizations that serve the public—are facing increased demand with fewer resources, having a quality workforce is essential. But many public-service agencies are experiencing significant human resource challenges, including high turnover due to poor pay and stressful working conditions, aging workforces, and shortages of skilled professionals. Any one of these issues can greatly impact a program’s success, and even the most well-designed programs will not work if they have people problems. Thus, activities aimed at building and developing our public-service workforce are critically important. Unfortunately, previous studies have shown that public-service fields such as government, education, and health care lag behind private-sector companies in most areas of talent development.¹

While a multifaceted approach is needed to address human resource issues in public service, the strategic expansion of national service—short-term commitments to volunteer or work for limited stipends in fields that help people and communities in areas such as education or conservation—has much to contribute to the development of “talent” in the helping fields. AmeriCorps, the federal government’s largest civilian national-service program, has been shown to have a significant impact on members’ career choices. A longitudinal study based on data collected eight years after members completed their one year of service conclusively demonstrates that AmeriCorps alumni are significantly more civically engaged and more likely to pursue public-service careers in the government and nonprofit sector than their counterparts in the comparison group.² Evidence from individual AmeriCorps programs similarly supports this conclusion.

Any expansion of national service, if it is to successfully bear fruit, must be rooted in:

- Approaches that meet the immediate human resource needs of the targeted field
- Long-term thinking about how to continue to engage participants even after they have completed service periods

National service is an ideal vehicle to connect with underutilized talent groups, including youth, retirees, veterans, and parents returning to the workforce—individuals who often express an interest in service.

A greater investment in national service produces a wealth of benefits, including helping agencies and organizations to:

- Manage fiscal constraints
- Strategically advance program goals
- Build and develop a workforce
- Access skilled professionals and individuals with valuable life experiences
- Spark innovation
- Elevate the prestige of their fields

Nonprofit organizations and government agencies at all levels should invest resources in building new service corps that take advantage of these benefits. This will ultimately help them to harness the talent within their field and achieve desired outcomes such as reducing poverty.

Various national-service models are informative, including ones from the emergency management, education, legal services, and child welfare fields. Important lessons can be learned from them about recruitment, training and mentoring, retention, establishing avenues for innovation, building career ladders, and ultimately achieving legislative and programmatic goals that improve the services being offered for the people and communities that they serve.

This paper lays out a blue print for establishing and expanding service models and provides guidance to help public agencies and organizations figure out how to get started and how to go about making important decisions concerning intended goals, program design, and the implementation of culture change.

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