



# Utilizing National Service as a 21st Century Workforce Strategy for Opportunity Youth

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# Introduction and summary

At the height of the Great Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC, as part of the New Deal. The CCC provided critically needed jobs to unskilled young men while implementing a natural resource conservation program on public lands across the country.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of nine years, nearly 3 million young men participated in the CCC, earning wages, food, shelter, and skills while planting more than 3 billion trees, combating forest fires, and providing aid in the wake of natural disasters.<sup>2</sup> Today, national service programs—voluntary programs supported through publicly and privately funded stipends and designed to foster leadership through sustained service that meets public needs—have played a critical role in the lives of millions of Americans.

Over the past 50 years, leaders from both sides of the aisle have supported service to meet goals of national significance. As a result, national service has been instrumental in tackling important challenges facing families and communities, such as addressing underperforming schools and rehabilitating housing for low-income families. National service also has helped foster important civic goals by bringing together diverse groups of individuals in a common purpose and building their sense of civic responsibility and community spirit. One of the most significant impacts of national service, however, is on the very people who perform the service.

Currently, there are 5.6 million opportunity youth, or young adults between ages 16 and 24 in the United States who are out of school and not working.<sup>3</sup> By 2020, the United States is projected to experience a shortfall of 5 million workers with education and training beyond a high school education,<sup>4</sup> underscoring the urgency of connecting youth who are currently unemployed or out of school to the jobs of the future. National service can be a powerful strategy to help these young adults reconnect with school and work. According to a recent report by the Corporation for National and Community Service, or CNCS, service is associated with greater employment outcomes.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the report shows that service can increase the likelihood of finding employment by 51 percent among volunteers without a high school diploma.

Given the barriers to employment that millions of youth and adults face, positions that are appropriate to their circumstances often require greater investment than opportunities targeting more educated individuals. National service initiatives, however, remain a good investment: Every \$1 invested in national service returns \$4 to society in terms of higher earnings, increased economic output, meeting public needs, and savings to taxpayers in the form of lower spending on government programs.<sup>6</sup>

Public- and private-sector leaders alike can advance employment for opportunity youth and other hard-to-employ populations by working to align national service programs with the current workforce development system. This requires expanding the current national service infrastructure to address the unique needs of opportunity youth, including enabling them to gain work experience or helping them pursue additional education or training. National service programs also should incorporate wraparound services—such as child care and transportation—that would enable opportunity youth to access career pathways in growing fields. In order to establish national service as a career ladder entry point for opportunity youth, this report outlines two new initiatives that federal leaders should implement:

- **Create a Service Catalyst grant program to build capacity and incentivize states to leverage funding streams in order to expand service programs for opportunity youth and marginalized adults.** CNCS should dedicate funds to provide Service Catalyst matching grants to competitively selected states and local governments. Governments should use these grants to create new service positions that align with workforce development goals, include wraparound services, and offer opportunities to serve and pursue education and training simultaneously. States should engage multiple forms of funding—including private-sector and state funds—in order to bring national service as a workforce development strategy to scale and reduce administrative burdens on nonprofits that host corps members. Congress should appropriate additional funds to take this strategy to scale.
- **Create Opportunity Youth Service-Learning Awards.** Congress should pass legislation to create Opportunity Youth Service-Learning Awards—to be administered through CNCS’ National Service Trust—that can allow opportunity youth to pay for education or training programs that are aligned with their service activity while they work. This would allow opportunity youth to jump-start their careers and earn living wages to support themselves and their families.

All national service programs aiming to serve opportunity youth and marginalized adults should integrate supportive services into existing corps programs. Young people with the greatest challenges often need comprehensive services to succeed—from substance abuse treatment to child care support.

In addition to these two new strategies, this report includes six recommendations to strengthen the existing national service system as a workforce development strategy. These recommendations are geared toward 1) increasing the accessibility of national service opportunities; 2) ensuring that such programs meet the needs of the economy; and 3) supporting workers who experience barriers to securing and sustaining employment.

- **Make it easier for youth to find national service opportunities.** In order to ensure that more opportunity youth have access to service opportunities, governments and organizations administering national service programs should: connect service year opportunities to one-stop career centers that help job seekers connect to a variety of career services; ensure job seekers who have turned to the safety net are connected with information about national service opportunities; and post all AmeriCorps, YouthBuild, and other publicly funded positions on the Service Year Exchange—a new database designed to match potential volunteers with service opportunities.
- **Reform and streamline key AmeriCorps rules to make it easier for grantees to operate programs.** These include removing barriers that discourage individuals with criminal backgrounds from applying and increasing the amount of time that can be spent on training programs.
- **Provide technical assistance to help state and local leaders utilize the opportunities created by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, or WIOA, to support national service.** Local leaders should use WIOA's flexibility to experiment with different employment models that incorporate national service for in-demand fields.
- **Create employment incentives to hire service year graduates.** Starting with federal agencies, noncompetitive hiring authority should be expanded to all service members who complete a certain amount of high-quality and recognized service experience. AmeriCorps VISTA and the Peace Corps already have this authority, as do some youth corps, but for too short a period of time.

- **Incorporate national service into federal initiatives that target high-poverty communities.** Federal place-based efforts that target high-poverty communities, such as the Choice Neighborhoods or the Promise Neighborhoods programs, should incorporate national service positions as a way to build the capacity of community improvement initiatives, similar to the federal Promise Zones initiative. Having corps members who come from the communities being served provides understanding of the community's local history and the challenges it faces.
- **Incorporate mentoring into service programs.** Programs should provide mentors from the community for opportunity youth engaged in national service. Without these intentional elements, programs may not have as great an impact on the employment outcomes of the youth who are serving. Furthermore, diverse programs can offer social capital benefits, such as programs that place opportunity youth and low-income community members alongside individuals with different social networks.

This report examines how national service improves employment outcomes for workers who face barriers to employment and makes recommendations to expand these opportunities and maximize their benefits for those who serve, their employers, and the U.S. economy as a whole.

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