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# AmeriCorps and Senior Corps Targeting Volunteer Management

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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It's taken a while, but it has started. And we need to see it as a call to action.

In 2004, the Urban Institute released what arguably remains the most important study ever produced for our field, [Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations: A Briefing Report](#). Exactly six years ago, I wrote a Hot Topic about it, "[A Great New Report to Praise, Criticize, and Use](#)." I praised the good, mentioned the bad, but warned about the ugly in the report. Specifically, I had great concerns about this puzzling statement on page 3:

*The most popular capacity building option among both charities and congregations with social service outreach activities is the addition of a one-year, full-time volunteer with a living stipend (like an AmeriCorps member), with responsibility for volunteer recruitment and management.*

Which was expanded upon later with comments such as this one on page 31:

*After being trained in volunteer management practices, AmeriCorps members can be placed in organizations where they can help address a number of volunteer management challenges. We found that AmeriCorps-type volunteers could be particularly useful in charities that are challenged in recruiting enough and the right kinds of volunteers, as well as in those charities that do not have time or money to train and supervise volunteers.*

All this emphasis on the need for a true commitment to volunteer management and the answer is a one-year newcomer to the field?

I have been waiting for some implementation of this new AmeriCorps role. For six years nothing emerged – until now. In the last month, I have seen three different initiatives in three different states, all with the common denominator of seeking to apply federal funding to projects in which national

service participants will be placed into local agencies as volunteer coordinators. These not only involve AmeriCorps members, but also propose new Senior Corps projects for the same purpose.

## The Bright Side

AmeriCorps members, just as so many VISTAs before them, certainly can be enormously helpful in building agency capacity to involve volunteers – though they are not the *solution* to the problem of lack of commitment to volunteer management. However, because I do not want readers to dismiss this essay as another one of “Susan’s rants,” I’m going to start by giving two big reasons why this initiative has potential and should be supported:

- Suddenly we may have a critical mass of people actually talking about volunteer management! When project leaders try to interest local agencies in accepting a national service placement for the purpose of strengthening volunteer involvement, one result has to be new awareness of the possibilities this offer holds. And recruiting volunteers to take on the challenge of developing volunteer engagement for these agencies, and then offering some training in how to do this right, also has to bode well for introducing new people to the profession. Maybe we’ll gain a new generation of young leaders of volunteer involvement who will commit to this career for the long term.
- If (and it’s a big “if”) the national service members are indeed given solid training in volunteer management – as well as ongoing support *throughout* their term of service – organizations may actually begin to see changes for the better in how much volunteers can contribute. Ideally, this should lead at least some of the host organizations to re-examine their attitudes and make a commitment to designating a permanent staff position for volunteer leadership.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that, in the late 1970s, I designed the curriculum for a full week of volunteer management training for VISTAs in the Middle Atlantic states. We delivered that intensive course several times and it seemed to work to prepare the VISTAs for their community organizing assignments. So this concept is hardly new. However, for today’s AmeriCorps, it’s a departure from its approach of direct service assignments only. The idea of involving Senior Corps members is an even newer development.

## Practical Concerns

So the potential is there, but the methodology has some problems. One is the issue of scattered initiatives. Right now new projects seem to be springing up in different places with all sorts of approaches and participants. It’s fine to experiment, but is this diversity being planned, monitored, and studied to reach some conclusion eventually about which works best?

A lot of money is being spent on a *granting* infrastructure. The Corporation for National and Community Service (The Corporation) is looking for intermediary organizations that, in turn, can find agencies seeking volunteer management staffing and recruit the prospective stipended volunteers to

do the work. Again, each project is doing this differently, so there will be a lot of energy put into reinventing an application and start-up process even before a single new local volunteer engagement activity is carried out.

Back in 2004, I wondered about the fundamental philosophy of the deployment of national service members as volunteer leaders:

- Why let agencies off the hook from making a long-term commitment (of funds and attention) to volunteer management?
- Why imply that someone fresh out of minimal training in volunteerism can be effective if no one else in the organization gets additional training to support them?

There needs to be a push to get receiving agencies to commit to *long-term volunteer involvement goals*, which would get off the ground by the efforts of the national service member. Dropping a newbie volunteer coordinator into a setting that has a take-it-or-leave-it attitude about community volunteers seems like a bad idea for both the national service member and for any volunteers she or he will recruit. Further, given the low cash cost to the host site for a stipended volunteer, what will this offer teach organizations about the need to commit appropriate resources to consistent, quality leadership of volunteers?

## The Opportunity to Do It Right

Filling volunteer management positions with short-term national service volunteers is happening now and without any real engagement of those of us who already understand the principles of volunteer leadership. ***It is absolutely critical that we, as professionals in volunteer management, monitor these developments and get involved early, rather than too late.***

Let's make sure this plan happens *with* us, not *without* us. How? Here are a few ideas – and I am eager to hear more from you all:

- Every state association of volunteer administrators should contact both their state's Corporation office and their national service commission to offer a collaboration. For example, give national service members assigned to volunteer management roles access to existing resources in the state: membership in the association, discount registration at state conferences, the chance to be mentored by an experienced volunteer administrator.
- The same can be done locally by any volunteer center, HandsOn affiliate, DOVIA, or professional network of volunteer administrators. The point is to find out who is doing the placements and ask for the national service member to be told about what's available for ongoing education and exchange in that area.
- If you hear of a project in your area, ask how you can help. Can you or some other experienced leader of volunteer involvement be part of the training program for the new service members? Help connect them to local resources?

- We need to advocate for national data collection and evaluation of all the different projects so that the outcomes can be assessed comprehensively. What does all of this mean in the long term to agencies, volunteers, and our profession?

Collectively, we can assure that the potential of this initiative overcomes the obstacles. And, after a while, we may have taught a whole lot of people to value the skills and impact of a full-time, designated director of volunteer involvement.

- *Have you seen this plan emerge yet in your area?*
- *What can you add to my lists of potentials and concerns?*
- *What else can we in the profession of volunteer administration do?*

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***Submitted 23 March 2010 by Aimee Inglis, Americorps Member, Cope Family Center, Napa, CA USA***

I am an Americorps member currently engaged in volunteer management, so I read this post with great interest. My time at my service site has been productive so far for both me and the agency. I think the keys to that success have been the following:

1. There was a significant investment in time and resources prior to my arrival to train staff on the best practices of volunteer management.
2. I participated in some of these trainings, and the consulting firm hired for this has been available to me throughout my service.
3. I am only one piece of our project to more deeply involve volunteers. Leadership, staff, and I work as a team to accomplish this.

I would be concerned about Americorps members in situations with any of the following characteristics:

1. Leadership is not invested in creating the culture change necessary to move from being an organization that casually involves volunteers to one that sees it as central to its mission.
2. Staff are not on-board and ready to work with volunteers.
3. There are no plans to train the Americorps member in volunteer management practices specifically.

I think Americorps members should be supplemental to a larger volunteer initiative, and shouldn't be solely responsible for a volunteer program's success. I agree that involvement from professional volunteer managers would be an exciting way to ensure success and also develop the field.

***Submitted 17 March 2010 by Tom Devine, Executive Director, Serve Wisconsin, Madison, WI US***

It is important to remember that the Corporation for National and Community Service is the largest

supporter of volunteerism in the Country. We also need to remember that unmanaged volunteering is the prevailing form of volunteering in this country and has its own value. So volunteering should probably be seen as a progression from spontaneous and sporadic engagement to managed and regular volunteer service. AmeriCorps programs are producing both types of volunteer opportunities and some AmeriCorps programs provide exceptionally well managed volunteer opportunities. It would be a mistake to underestimate national service providers and an even larger mistake would be failing to establish working relationships with AmeriCorps programs, State Offices, and State Commissions. AmeriCorps has been set on a path to increase the number of AmeriCorps members from 75,000 in 2009 to 250,000 by 2017. If Congress holds true to that commitment then multi-million dollar increases will continue for AmeriCorps (2010 = \$100 million increase and 2011 is proposed for \$115 million increase). It is all about finding out how to play and how to get the players to play.

***Submitted 10 March 2010 by Marty O'Dell, CVA, Volunteer Program Manager, Dayton Ohio, USA***

It seems to me that this situation points back to the fact that many high level executives believe that volunteer management can be performed by anyone. Until we are able to change that perception this idea and conversation will come up again and again.

When was the last time you heard of a shortage of college professors being filled with high school graduates with 3 weeks of extra training?

As professionals we need to increase our credibility by insisting on higher standards of training and accountability.

***Submitted 4 March 2010 by Maureen K. Eccleston, Director, Volunteer Maryland, Baltimore, MD USA***

As you say, AmeriCorps members can be enormously helpful in building agency capacity to involve volunteers. Since 1992, Volunteer Maryland has worked with 521 AmeriCorps members who have developed or improved infrastructure for volunteer programs at more than 400 nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and schools. You are also correct in noting that solid training and ongoing support is a real key to this success. Importantly, that training must be for both the AmeriCorps members and the staff at the organizations. Otherwise, as you say, effectiveness is lost.

At Volunteer Maryland, our first step is to form strong partnerships with organizations that have a need for volunteers and a commitment to supporting the development of a volunteer program and its sustainability after the completion of an AmeriCorps year of service. We then train both the AmeriCorps members and staff from the organizations in the best practices of volunteer management (including utilizing The Volunteer Management Audit). Our AmeriCorps members are required to complete more than 100 hours of training during the service year; that two weeks prior to service and monthly trainings thereafter. Organization staff also commit to this training, attending four full training days throughout the year.

The results are telling. We survey our partner organizations for three years after the completion of the AmeriCorps service year; in the last three years, 91 percent of organizations reported that their volunteer programs have been sustained beyond the AmeriCorps year. Our AmeriCorps alumni also continue to be involved in nonprofit and volunteer management, many going on to work as volunteer coordinators in organizations in Maryland and beyond.

Programs like Volunteer Maryland provide a needed and necessary service and a win-win situation. With more nonprofit organizations trained in volunteer management and more AmeriCorps members committing to the field of volunteerism, community needs are met and the volunteerism field is strengthened.

***Submitted 3 March 2010 by Lora Silver, Oakland, CA USA***

I see the most potential from these initiatives if the mandatory criteria includes that the applicant organization does not have staff for the volunteer program - and it's an explicit goal that the incoming AmeriCorps member is charged with laying the groundwork and securing funding to support a staff manager of the volunteer program to replace the AmeriCorps member. Some of you already mentioned that the above should be favored in the application process, but I would go one step further to make it mandatory. If it were mandatory, this sort of AmeriCorps program would communicate a true valuing of volunteer management staff - and I think it would alleviate some of your well-founded concerns, Susan. It would show that volunteer programs without dedicated staff are vulnerable. We could eventually shift the mindset of the average organization - with a shared vision to devote strategic thinking and funding (usually in the form of a staff person) to its volunteer program just as the organization would allocate support to other programs or resource categories.

I think outcome evaluation is absolutely critical to any and all of these new AmeriCorps initiatives. I would only hope that the Corporation puts equal money behind thorough evaluation if it really wants to make an impact in this area - they certainly require organizations to report outcomes throughout the application process and reporting, so it is only logical that they include outcome evaluation in the cost of doing this business. However all too many funders value outcome-oriented results without wanting THEIR money to go toward it. What avenues are there to advocate for more emphasis on outcome evaluation of these programs? What about a third-party evaluator since the Corporation's process would likely be burdensome, and many organizations do not have in-house outcome evaluation capacity?

***Submitted 2 March 2010 by Jean Ozols, United Way of Bartholomew County, Director of Resource Development, Columbus, Indiana***

Our Volunteer Center leads an AmeriCorps program: "Volunteer Management Capacity Building". We recruit, train and place 20 AmeriCorps members to serve up to 2 years as Volunteer Resource Managers for local nfp's who do not have a formal volunteer program. The training is intensive-30 hours covering the ABC's of volunteer management before a member is placed in an organization. Training is ongoing all year long. Members are also required to attend our community's monthly DOVIA meetings. The goal for each AMeriCorps member is to create a formal, viable, sustainable

volunteer program so when their term(s) is/are complete, they leave a solid and established program behind and a NFP that understands that the volunteer manager role is critical to the success of the volunteer program. We have built into our program goals that half of our participating NFP's will strive to build into their budgets funding for at least a part time Volunteer Resource Manager.

***Submitted 2 March 2010 by anon***

Yes, AmeriCorps member/volunteers should be able to be sent to other agencies. When I was in AmeriCorps we asked if we could help out with Food Pantries, Tutoring, Street Cleaning, Weeding, Cleaning up lots, and escorting our local Health Department worker.

***Submitted 2 March 2010 by Glen Stubbolo, Delaware USA***

I have successfully been running an AmeriCorps program with the backbone being Volunteer Coordinators. Ours is a statewide program, placing Volunteer Coordinators within Parks to coordinate community service volunteer activities under the auspices and supervision from my Central Office. The members receive intensive Volunteer Training, including attendance at our state's Certified Volunteer Administrator Training. As a member and former officer for our Association of Volunteer Administrators, all AmeriCorps members become organization members, attending trainings and conference.

I have not seen the difficulties Susan has experienced. I think this is principally because this program has developed under the direction of professional volunteer administrators, with very clear procedures, policies and objectives. In essence, the AmeriCorps VC's are the extension of staffing for the Volunteer Office, they are not the only staffing in the office.

I recognize that the time line is the greatest factor - one and done is hard on the program and volunteers - perpetually refilling the role, just as the members are getting really good at them.

We have actually seen a growth in our organizations commitment to volunteer service, and employment of additional professional volunteer administrators. Because volunteering in our program has increased from 30,000 annual volunteer hours to over 130,000, there is a need from the central Volunteer office to make certain the AmeriCorps Volunteer coordinators are receiving support and guidance in achieving volunteer program objectives and to maintain high quality volunteer program.

I would agree - this is a time of great opportunity. There are some strange models out there in national service. I believe it can work best when we already know what we want to have done and the members are an extension of what we envision.

As an aside, an AmeriCorps grant is NOT an easy thing to administer. It comes with a lot of strings attached. However, the high quality members we have received and the services being provided to our community are very real.

I could go on about pluses and minuses for national service, they do exist, but that would be for another discussion. Don't be afraid of potential of national service, but do be careful and very clear on role and purpose. Hope this helps.

***Submitted 2 March 2010 by Anne B. Schink, ABS Consulting, Consultant in Volunteer Management, South Portland, ME USA***

In Maine many, if not most, AmeriCorps members are placed in very small nonprofits and do, in fact, often serve as the de facto manager of volunteers. I have had the pleasure of conducting a good bit of training for them in a variety of venues ranging from three hour workshops to three day trainings. All using the 12 Essential Practices of none-other-than Susan Ellis as part of that framework! For organizations that have never had enough staff to have a designated manager of volunteers, the arrival of an enthusiastic AmeriCorps member is an opportunity for the organization to take a long, hard look at how they have engaged volunteers in the past, both in leadership and direct service roles. Knowing that consultants and trainers (like me), service commissions and corporation state offices, and statewide/regional volunteer networks are all on the same page in providing training and resources through conferences, consulting, and websites have gone a long way to building a common understanding of how effective volunteer management programs are run.

***Submitted 2 March 2010 by Nicolette Winner, Council on Rural Services, HandsOn West Central Ohio, Piqua, OH USA***

As a HandsOn affiliate internal to another nonprofit organization, we're seeing this conversation pop up repeatedly. Our solution? If we are in fact going to ask our RSVP volunteers to lead other volunteers, let's put them through the Volunteer Management Training Series for free. Connect them with local DOVIA organizations. Support them just as much, if not more, than you would a paid staff person. The same is true of AmeriCorps volunteers. The importance of getting both groups to treat the position as a profession will be key, and it's up to us to reach out and highlight the education and training needed to make that happen for this volunteers.

***Submitted 2 March 2010 by Allyson, Georgia USA***

As a former VISTA, and several years later a national service program director, I have experienced the benefits and challenges of the program first-hand. The success in capacity building for an organization using a national service member is based on choosing the right person who can infuse the organization with new energy and ideas, without challenging the staff already in place. This is a delicate balance. Training is critical for AmeriCorps and VISTA members, and is often an underfunded part of the program. Planning, good supervision, and a commitment to the impact this type of service can have are critical as well.

Longer-term service assignments also exist within other organizations that are not federally funded, faith-based ones such as the Lutheran Volunteer Corps, or placements directly with organizations. I think Susan's idea of a mentoring program for new volunteer coordinators in this significant role is excellent. Is there a way that a matching program can be developed on the national level so that new service members could find someone to reach out to? I think this could be done virtually.



***Submitted 2 March 2010 by Tony Goodrow, Volunteer2.com. President,  
Burlington, Ontario Canada***

Given that the real successes of a program such as this are the ones in effect beyond the first 12 months, applicant organizations who can document a strategy for continuing the role of professional volunteer management within their organization should be given priority in the selection process.

Perhaps the Corporation for National and Community Service office and agencies that become the granting organizations have given or will give this some consideration.

All types of associations of volunteer administrators can help sculpt this program's outcomes and advocate for the profession at the same by suggesting this be added to the selection process (if it is not there already) when they contact state's Corporation office or come into contact with a granting organization.

***Submitted 2 March 2010 by Marilyn M. Redden, Worthington Christian Village, Volunteer Coordinator,  
Columbus, Ohio U.S.A.***

Let's face it, anything the federal government has a hand in is suspect by many of us because of past experiences. If this could come down to local, or at least state, supervision, the plan might work. I have two concerns which were mentioned:

1. Who will train, and how
2. Letting someone else pay for this will allow the tax exempt organization to be free of the responsibility for supporting by way of the money and, hence, could be a reason for little involvement in the success of the program.

Answering to the government by way of evaluations will be a hassle and not welcomed - another problem. We prefer to do our own evaluating. We know what we need.

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