

States Gear Up for Americorps

Enthusiasm for National Service Fuels Hard Work

By Jane Harvey



In late June, the review process begins for awarding the state portion of Americorps grants under the National and Community Service Trust Act. Since the act was signed into law last September, states have moved quickly to establish the necessary commissions that will administer the funds to underwrite the costs of the ambitious national service initiative. It's been new territory all the way, requiring long hours and step-by-step policy development on national, state and local levels. Because the total concept is still a work in progress, many procedures are being developed and put into practice at virtually the same time. And those working in the field have been put to the test on their ability to adapt to ongoing changes.

And change has been the watchword as the process gets under way. In a recent issue of "Grapevine," a nonprofit sector newsletter, editor Sue Vineyard cautioned readers to expect a lot of the information on the grant-making process to change. "Part of that is simply because setting up an undertaking of this sort is immensely complicated, especially when it involves actions in 50 states as well as integrating an existing federal agency, ACTION, into the new Corporation." Her advice: "Be sure you're in the information pipelines, because there will be limited time to learn and react."

Such changeability is one strength of the process, says Billie Ann Myers, a consultant to the Corporation for National Service. "It's much more like entrepreneurial corporations than bureaucratic government. The regulations have changed because people in the field said they needed to be changed. The degree of responsiveness is unprecedented. The whole process is a living organism—it's reinventing government, and there's so much room for creativity," she explains.

All 50 states are well on their way to implementing the new national service initiatives, according to Chris Murphy, a member of the state support team at the Corporation for National Service. Of those, 46 have established state commissions; four states are working through transitional entities and will set up state

commissions in the future. Murphy says the Corporation is gearing up to process the Americorps operations in a speedy, efficient manner.

The applications are due to the Corporation June 22. The Corporation expects to complete its review and selection by the end of July and notify the state commission of the results soon thereafter. The goal is to have the selected programs operational by fall.

The Corporation will award around \$103.6 million to the states for Americorps projects. At the national level those funds are divided almost equally between two categories: predetermined state formula allocations and competitive grants. In the first category, state commissions apply to the Corporation for funding to make subgrants to proposed programs. Each state is assigned a formula allocation—based on population—that consists of program funds and educational awards. For example, California is allocated \$6.2 million in program funds and 448 educational awards; Wyoming is allocated \$93,188 in program funds and seven educational awards. In the competitive category, each state is assigned a maximum number of projects that may be submitted, based on population. Using the same states as examples: California may submit up to 15 programs; Wyoming may submit up to three programs. The competitive funds also come with educational credits that are redeemable at state colleges and universities.

In addition to the formula allocation and competitive funds, another \$3.1 million in Americorps funds is being awarded to Indian tribes and territories. These funds are awarded directly by the Corporation and don't go through the state commissions.

Here's how the state application process generally works. State commissions receive all proposals between mid-April and mid-May. They spend a couple of weeks analyzing the proposals and selecting the strongest programs to submit. (States pre-select the programs for all the funds coming through the states; but the Corporation decides which programs will receive competitive funds. All states that qualify will receive

funding under the formula-allocation portion, but they are not guaranteed to receive funds under the competitive portion.)

Once a state commission has selected which proposals it wants to submit to the Corporation, it may go back to the programs and work with them to make the proposals even better. Or a commission might suggest that some programs combine forces to form coalitions which would result in even stronger proposals.

The proposals must contain every detail of relevance to the program's operation and funding. In addition to the program proposal, each application must include a state plan, which gives a current snapshot of the state's own service initiatives, including existing national service programs in which the state is involved. The application must explain fully proposed program expansions or innovative new programs and how they fit into the state plan. All the application requirements fulfilled, the proposals are sent to the Corporation in Washington.

To get an idea of what's been going on around the country, Leadership asked several state commissions to share their approaches to the Americorps process.

Alabama

National service is new to Alabama, so everything related to Americorps was started from scratch. Kim Cartran and Chris Cochran codirect the Governor's Office on National and Community Service and serve as staff to the Alabama State Commission on National and Community Service. Cartran calls the 25 commission members "good, grassroots folks" who have given generously of their time—and even paid their own travel expenses to get the Alabama effort off the ground.

Prospective commission members submitted resumes and were carefully interviewed. Cartran described the resulting commission as "very sensitive to diversity, but a little light on youth service." The new commission spent more than 100 hours in training and attended an intensive national service workshop.

Seven forums were held statewide to introduce the various aspects of national service, including Americorps. Cartran estimates that at least 100 people attended every forum. After the forums, request for proposal (RFP) information was sent to everyone who attended, inviting them to a grant-writing session in March. About 140 people attended that meeting which "walked them through the Americorps and Learn and Serve America process and grant-writing," said Cartran. The Volunteer Centers in the state have played a vital role in the process, according to Cartran, by sharing expertise and disseminating RFPs.

After proposals came in the end of April, commission members made visits to the program sites before turning over the proposals to grant writers. Next came a grant

review retreat where the commission discussed the proposals, first in small groups then in a "roundtable made up of all 25 commission members," explained Cartran. She noted that because Alabama's RFP format is different from the Corporation's, a team of grant writers will turn the chosen proposals into the formal applications.

Based on calls received, Cartran expected about 25 to 30 Americorps proposals. Alabama is allocated three formula programs and up to five competitive. She concedes that some parts of the program have been confusing, and "we've had to work that much harder to have it make sense to the people here who haven't been so involved in federal programs."

Kansas

"We held six public hearings across the state in February and many special topic sessions for targeted groups, such as higher education, city government, community-based organizations including YWCAs and YMCAs, formerly ACTION-supported programs, intergenerational programs, PRIDE, a rural initiative," said Patricia P. Kells, executive director of Kansas State Commission for National and Community Service. Kells also acts as director of the Kansas Office for Community Service, which is the administrative arm of the commission and operates under the Kansas State Board of Education.

After the hearings were completed, the commission decided on a strategy to make the most of the limited dollars available to Kansas through Americorps. "During the current [Americorps] grant solicitation phase," Kells explained, "Kansas gave priority to continuation of four existing programs and the addition of new Americorps programs in Wichita and Kansas City." Kells added that the commission provided ongoing technical assistance to would-be grantees, including on-site visits to help with development of programs.

Requests for Americorp grants, due April 22, were reviewed by a panel that includes youths and state commission members. Once the state commission made the final decision, staff members from the Office of Community Service helped potential grantees make revisions in their application based on recommendations of grant reviewers and the state commission. Kells said, "We expect to submit two proposals in the formula portion and four or five in the competitive portion."

Massachusetts

Thousands of people attended public information sessions held early this year around the state, said state commission member Joe Madison. "That helped us identify a thousand or so interested organizations. We





sent out notices, and asked them to submit a five-page concept paper by April 20." He said the commission didn't ask for full applications at this stage because the commission could only select only a few programs, and "we didn't want them to do the work for nothing." He noted, "We are currently supporting 10 programs with state dollars. We'll continue to support these existing programs if they meet criteria and quality remains strong. So we're really looking for a handful of new ideas." Madison expected competition to be keen. "We've heard there's tremendous interest in this—from schools, elder agencies, departments of correction, people working with disabilities, the whole universe of nonprofits. It will be very challenging for the commission."

Washington

Washington made the most of technology in getting out the word about Americorps, said Bill Basl, executive director for the Washington Commission for National and Community Service. The commission hosted a statewide teleconference April 25 on Americorp and the application process. In the weeks before the teleconference, information had been distributed about the RFPs. During the two-hour teleconference, "we walked people through the RFP and paused at times for questions from all seven sites," said Basl. He and the commission chairperson participated; a local CBS affiliate in Seattle donated an anchor. The teleconference followed 12 community forums on national service held in March. More than 400 people attended, said Basl. "People are very, very interested in service."

Early on, the state commission identified three statewide priorities: literacy among youths and adults; youth programs for after school and late nights and summers; and parenthood education for teens.

Basl anticipated a high number of applications, and "I hope we don't oversell it the first year, because money is tight." He said the amount of money available is "not much compared with the interest that is being shown." He noted that Washington will receive less money in the new formula allocation portion than it received in the past under the old system. The state can submit up to five programs for competitive funding, and Basl hopes to do well in that portion of Americorp.

State finalists were selected by the state commission based on recommendations from a review committee made up of commission members. Because of the advance work done through the teleconference, Basl said the commission expected to receive the applications in submittable form, requiring little or no revision. ■

Jane Harvey is the editor of LEADERSHIP.



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