



Getting
Started

A Guide for
AmeriCorps Members

Welcome to AmeriCorps!

As an AmeriCorps member, you will set an example of caring and community spirit that America needs.

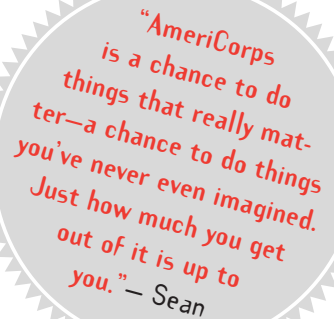
Our country has difficult problems and big challenges—too many children are falling behind their classmates; many families don't feel safe in their own neighborhoods; and others can't afford decent housing or health care. During your term of service as an AmeriCorps member, you won't solve these problems single-handedly—but you will play an important role in bringing communities together to help solve these and other problems.

You are carrying on an American tradition of service that dates back to our nation's founding more than 200 years ago. Americans have always found ways to help others and make our nation stronger—through military service, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Peace Corps, and in other ways. The 250,000-plus Americans who have served in AmeriCorps have done what other generations of Americans have done before—taken an active role as citizens to make a difference for themselves and others. What happens next is up to you.

This guide is intended to describe AmeriCorps and your role in it, but your AmeriCorps experience will be what you make of it. Because you have made a commitment to serve, you are a role model for people of all ages in your community, and across the country. Show others the importance of serving. Demonstrate what it means to be an active citizen. Uphold and pass on the ethic of service—by involving others in your service projects, telling people about your experience with AmeriCorps, and encouraging your friends to join AmeriCorps.

What is AmeriCorps?

If you're a new AmeriCorps member but don't quite understand what AmeriCorps is, or how you fit in, don't feel bad. It's a little complicated when you consider all the programs where AmeriCorps members serve, and all the ways they serve. To understand what AmeriCorps is all about, consider what all AmeriCorps members have in common.



“AmeriCorps is a chance to do things that really matter—a chance to do things you’ve never even imagined. Just how much you get out of it is up to you.” — Sean

Your Colleagues

AmeriCorps members are Americans of all ages who have made a commitment to serve their communities and country. Since 1994, more than 250,000 people have served in AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps members range in age from seventeen to older than ninety. Some have college degrees; others have completed high school or are earning a GED. They reflect the diversity of America in age, ethnicity, education, race, gender, and religion.

Your Commitment

As an AmeriCorps member, you are expected to adhere to the AmeriCorps pledge. (If you don't have a pledge certificate, ask your project director for one.) The pledge represents the commitment you have taken to serve not just this year, but in the years ahead.

I will get things done for America—to make our people safer, smarter, and healthier.

I will bring Americans together to strengthen our communities.

Faced with apathy, I will take action.

Faced with conflict, I will seek common ground.

Faced with adversity, I will persevere.

I will carry this commitment with me this year and beyond.

I am an AmeriCorps member, and I will get things done.

— the AmeriCorps pledge

Your Assignment

As an AmeriCorps member, you may serve in a community organization, a school, or a national park. You may serve at several different locations, and you may even travel to help other communities in your area. One of the strengths of AmeriCorps is the range of services its members provide—helping make children healthier, schools better, streets safer, and the environment cleaner.

The Big Picture

AmeriCorps has four main goals:

Getting Things Done. AmeriCorps members help communities solve problems in the areas of education, public safety, the environment, and other human needs (like health and housing) by serving directly and by getting other people to serve as volunteers.

Strengthening Communities. AmeriCorps members help unite individuals from all different backgrounds—and organizations of all kinds—in a common effort to improve communities.

Encouraging Responsibility. AmeriCorps members explore and exercise their responsibilities to their communities, their families, and themselves—during their service experience and throughout their lives.

Expanding Opportunity. AmeriCorps helps those who help America. AmeriCorps members receive awards to further their education or to pay back student loans. They also gain valuable job experience, specialized training, and other skills.

If you have questions about how your program helps fulfill the overall mission and objectives of AmeriCorps, discuss it with your fellow members or your project director. And if you have suggestions about how AmeriCorps can better serve your community and the nation, please share your ideas with your project director, your state commission, or the staff of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

For more information about AmeriCorps and the accomplishments of your fellow members across the country, visit the AmeriCorps website at www.americorps.org.

“I was impressed with the other participants in my program. The youngest are eighteen and the oldest are in their fifties; some are finishing their GED, some are finishing college, and some are retired. But they share one commonality: No matter what age or race, they’re all here for the same reason—to serve.”

— Sara

Your Rights and Responsibilities

“I have gained a stronger appreciation of my rights as an American citizen. I now realize that along with rights come enormous responsibilities. I am responsible for my community.”

— Sondra

Like any group of individuals working together, AmeriCorps members must follow certain rules and regulations in order to be effective. The rights and responsibilities listed below are merely illustrative, and your project director may identify others. AmeriCorps*VISTA members are subject to similar rights and prohibitions. Consult the VISTA handbook or your program sponsor for details.

Rights:

- Participation in the Corporation and its programs and projects must be based on merit and equal opportunity for all, without regard to factors such as race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, political affiliation, marital or parental status, military service, or religious, community, or social affiliations.
- You have a right to reasonable accommodation for disabilities. Programs must furnish reasonable accommodations for the known physical and mental limitations of qualified AmeriCorps members.
- If you believe your rights have been violated, you may report such violations to the directors of your program, who must establish and maintain a procedure for filing and adjudicating certain grievances. You may also file discrimination-related grievances with the Equal Opportunity Counselor of the Corporation for National and Community Service at (202) 606-5000, ext. 312 (voice), or (202) 606-5256 (TTY).

Responsibilities:

- To earn an education award, you must satisfactorily complete your program requirements and your full term of service (at least 1,700 hours during a nine- to twelve-month period for the full-time award and at least 900 hours over a one- to two-year period of time for the part-time award).
- Satisfactory service includes attendance, compliance with applicable rules, a positive attitude, quality service, and respect toward others in the program and in the community.
- You may be asked to sign a contract stating your rights and responsibilities while in AmeriCorps. You must abide by this contract and follow the rules of your program. You may be suspended or terminated if you violate the stated rules of behavior.

Prohibited Activities:

There are certain activities, including lobbying, political, or advocacy

activities, that you may not perform as an AmeriCorps member. Generally, you may not engage in any conduct that would associate the national service program or the Corporation for National and Community Service with any prohibited activity.

As an AmeriCorps member, you may not:

- engage in any effort to influence legislation, including state or local ballot initiatives or lobbying for your AmeriCorps program; for example, you may not organize a letter-writing campaign to Congress;
- engage in partisan political activities or other activities designed to influence the outcome of an election to any public office;
- organize or take part in political demonstrations or rallies;
- organize or participate in protests, petitions, boycotts, or strikes;
- assist, promote, or deter union organizing;
- impair existing contracts for services or collective bargaining agreements;
- participate in, or endorse, events or activities that are likely to include advocacy for or against political parties, political platforms, political candidates, proposed legislation, or elected officials; for example, you may not print politically charged articles in a Corporation-funded newsletter;
- perform clerical work, research, or fundraising, except if incidental to your direct service activities;
- engage in religious instruction; conduct worship services; provide instruction as part of a program that includes mandatory religious instruction or worship; construct or operate facilities devoted to religious instruction or worship; maintain facilities primarily or inherently devoted to religious instruction or worship; or engage in any form of religious proselytization; or
- provide a direct benefit to a for-profit entity, a labor union, a partisan political organization, or, in general, an organization engaged in the religious activities described in the preceding bullet.

There are also several types of activities that your program may not assign to you, such as:

- activities that pose a significant risk to you or other participants;
- assignments that displace employees;
- internships with for-profit businesses as part of the education and training component of the program; and
- any of the prohibited activities mentioned above.

Like other private citizens, you may participate in the above-listed activities on your own time, at your own expense, and at your own initiative. However, you may not wear your AmeriCorps t-shirt or other service gear in such instances. You are expected to maintain a code of conduct and professional behavior at all times. Violations of this expectation could result in early termination or suspension.

Your Education Award

"With AmeriCorps, I get a clear and concrete purpose, a direction and skill, a direction and purpose, and when I'm done serving, I get a chance to go to college and a hope for a better life."
— Phillip

As an AmeriCorps member, you have an opportunity to make a lasting impact on the lives of people in the community where you serve. One of the ways that AmeriCorps can make an impact on your life is to help you reach your goals with the education award. When you successfully complete your service, you will receive an education award that you can use to attend qualified institutions of higher education or training or to repay qualified student loans.

To qualify for an education award, you must successfully complete the required "term of service" for your program. If you are a member of AmeriCorps*VISTA, you may, at certain times, choose to receive a cash payment of \$100.00 per month of service instead of the education award. If you are a member of any other AmeriCorps program, you will be eligible only for the education award.

The following information can help you use your education award. If you have other questions, please call (888) 507-5962. Information also is available on the AmeriCorps website at www.americorps.org.

What Can You Use Your Education Award For?

You can use your education award in the following ways, or a combination of them:

- to repay qualified existing or future student loans;
- to pay all or part of the current cost of attending a qualified institution of higher education (including certain vocational programs); or
- to pay current expenses while participating in an approved school-to-work program.

What are the Categories of Education Awards?

- If you successfully complete one full-time term of service (as defined by your program), you will be eligible for an award of \$4,725.00.
- If you successfully complete one part-time term of service (at least 900 hours over two years or less), you will be eligible for an award of \$2,362.50.

- If you are in a short-term program, such as a summer program, you will be eligible for a "reduced part-time" award—usually \$1,000 or less.

If you serve at least 15 percent of your term and leave for compelling personal circumstances (as determined by your project director), you may be eligible for a prorated award based on the number of service hours you complete.

How Many Education Awards Can You Receive?

You can receive up to two education awards, and only for your first two terms of service, regardless of whether they are for full-time, part-time, or reduced part-time terms. Even if you did not complete one of your first two terms of service, you cannot receive an education award for a third term.

Which Colleges and Universities Are "Qualified Institutions"?

You can use your education award at most institutions of higher education (including graduate and professional programs), as well as some vocational schools. An institution is considered qualified for the education award if it has an agreement with the U.S. Department of Education whereby its students are eligible for at least one of the federally backed forms of financial assistance—such as Pell Grants, Perkins Loans, Stafford Loans, National Direct Loans, and Federal Consolidated Loans. To make sure the institution you want to attend is qualified, check with the financial aid office to see that they are a Title IV school before you make specific plans.

What Types of Loans Can the Education Award Repay?

Most post-secondary loans that are backed by the federal government are qualified for repayment with an AmeriCorps education award. Your lender should be able to tell you if your loan is qualified.

Qualified loans include:

- Stafford Loans
- William D. Ford Direct Loans
- Supplemental Loans for Students
- Nursing Student Loans
- Loans issued to AmeriCorps members by the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education
- Perkins Loans
- Federal Consolidated Loans
- Primary Care Loans
- Health Education Assistance Loans

“AmeriCorps is a limited opportunity, and for people who get a chance to serve, there’s a heavy responsibility to make the most of it.”

—Carrie

What Types of Expenses Are Considered Part of the Current "Cost of Attending" an Institution?

"Cost of attending" may include tuition, room and board, books, supplies, transportation, and other various expenses. The financial aid office of each school has information on expenses for specific academic programs, and that office determines the cost of attendance for the school.

When Can You Use Your Education Award?

You can use your education award any time after you receive your voucher—up to seven years after the date you end your service. You can apply for an extension if:

- you are unavoidably prevented from using the award during that time; or
- you perform another term of service in an approved program. To be considered for an extension, you must apply before the end of the seven-year period.

Is the Education Award Taxable?

Yes. You will be taxed on your education award in the year you use it. For example, if you use all or part of your award for college in the Spring of 2001, when you file your 2001 taxes, you must pay taxes on the portion of the award you used.

However, you may be able to take advantage of the Hope Scholarship Credit or the Lifelong Learning Credit. Those credits may provide you with significant tax relief. Both the Department of Education and the Internal Revenue Service have information on these tax provisions.

The Corporation for National and Community Service does not deduct taxes from the award, but in late January it sends 1099 Forms to all AmeriCorps members who have made payments from their education awards and who have accrued interest during the previous year. The 1099 Form does not need to be included in your tax return, but it reflects the amount that the National Service Trust reports to the IRS as taxable miscellaneous income. If you have questions about how to file taxes for your award, contact your local IRS office.

What Do You Need To Do to Use Your Education Award?

1. At the end of your term of service, fill out the National Service Trust End of Term of Service Form. Your project director will send

this form to the National Service Trust to certify that you have finished your term of service and are now eligible to receive your award. Within four weeks of receiving the form, the Trust will mail you an award packet with a Voucher and Payment Request Form and instructions. It will also include documentation of the exact amount of the award you will be receiving.

2. Present the voucher to the school you plan to attend (to cover the costs of attending) or to your loan holder (to pay back an existing loan). The school or loan holder will complete a portion of the voucher and send it to the Trust for payment. The Trust will make payments directly to the institution when you specifically authorize them on the voucher form. Every time a payment is made, you will be sent a new Voucher and Payment Request Form and a statement of the new balance of your trust fund.

What If You Move?

Because voucher forms will be sent to the address that you furnish on your end-of-term form, it is important for you to inform the Trust of any changes to your address.

What About Paying Student Loans During Your Term of Service?

For most qualified student loans, the loan holder must approve your request for forbearance during your term of service. Forbearance is not automatic; you must request it. During a period of forbearance, you do not have to make payments, although interest continues to accumulate on your loans. If you qualified for loan forbearance and completed the appropriate form at the beginning of your term of service, your forbearance should remain in effect until you complete your service. You may want to check with your loan holder to be sure that the forbearance has been placed in effect.

How Do You Make Interest Payments on Existing Loans?

If you obtained loan forbearance at the beginning of your term of service, you need to submit an interest accrual form to your loan holder when your term has ended. The loan holder must complete the bottom of the form, compute the total accrued interest, and send it to the Trust for payment. The Trust can pay your interest only if you successfully complete your term of service and receive an education award. This amount is in addition to your education award.

*"If you see a problem, you have a responsibility to do something about it. AmeriCorps gave me that chance."
— Josh*

National Service—AmeriCorps and More

“I grew up in a very small, sheltered neighborhood. I wanted to meet new people and learn about new cultures and different ideas. I saw national service as a coalition of people who were coming together from all kinds of backgrounds to work together in this really positive movement.”

— Kelly

You’re part of a national group of more than 50,000 AmeriCorps members. You’re also part of an even larger movement.

You are one of more than two million Americans who have answered the call of national service this year. National service includes everyone from the first-grade student who supports a recycling program to the retired professional who visits patients in a hospital. And the seventh-grader who helps younger students learn to read and the college graduate who helps organize an after-school program for kids in his neighborhood. And the retired professional who participates in a neighborhood watch program and the college student who responds to a natural disaster in a nearby community.

Here’s how national service is set up:

The **Corporation for National and Community Service**, based in Washington, D.C., supports a range of full-time and part-time service opportunities through funding provided by Congress and other support from local and private sector partners.

AmeriCorps is divided into three main parts:

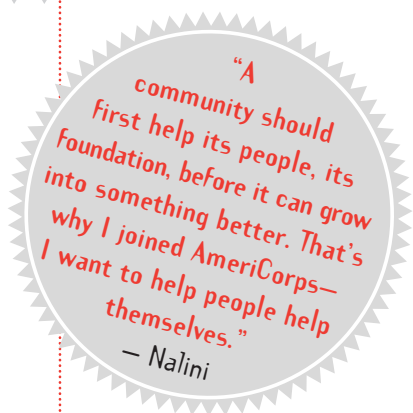
- **AmeriCorps*State and National** support programs that the Corporation or a state has selected. This includes the many hundreds of national and local nonprofit organizations through which AmeriCorps members serve. State commissions distribute two-thirds of AmeriCorps funding to local programs that the state selects, and the Corporation distributes other funding directly to national and local programs, like Habitat for Humanity, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and the American Red Cross.
- Like AmeriCorps*State and National, **AmeriCorps*VISTA** is also a national network of programs, with a particular focus on helping low-income communities. AmeriCorps*VISTA members generally serve full-time for one year in urban and rural areas.
- **AmeriCorps*National Civilian Community Corps** is a national program in which members age eighteen to twenty-four serve in teams on short-term service projects. AmeriCorps*NCCC members live on one of five campuses—in Washington, D.C.; Perry Point, Md.; Sacramento, Calif.; Denver, Colo.; and Charleston, S.C.—and travel to help other communities.

The Corporation for National and Community Service also oversees Learn and Serve America and Senior Corps.

Learn and Serve America gives students from kindergarten through college a chance to combine service and learning. With the help of Learn and Serve grants, elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and nonprofit organizations develop service-learning activities for students, adults, teachers, and youth who are not in school.

Senior Corps consists of a half million Americans age fifty-five and older who help meet community challenges with their skills, experience, and talents—serving as Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, and volunteers with RSVP (the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program).

- **Foster Grandparents** serve as extended family members to nearly 80,000 children and youth with exceptional needs. Foster Grandparents serve in schools, hospitals, correctional institutions, and Head Start and day care centers—for twenty hours a week or more. They help abused or neglected children, mentor troubled teenagers and young mothers, and care for premature infants and children with physical disabilities.
- **Senior Companions** provide assistance and friendship to seniors who have difficulty with daily living tasks, helping them live independently in their homes instead of moving to institutionalized care. They usually serve two to four clients during their twenty hours of weekly service.
- **RSVP** is one of the largest volunteer efforts in the nation—matching programs that need volunteers with some 450,000 older Americans who serve part-time. Volunteers organize neighborhood watch programs, tutor teenagers, renovate homes, teach English to immigrants, help victims of natural disasters, and serve communities in many other ways.



Throughout your term as an AmeriCorps member and as you move on to other forms of service, you may want to find ways to serve with your fellow national service colleagues—in local service events and on special days like the Martin Luther King Day of Service, National Volunteer Week, and Make a Difference Day.

For more information, visit the national service website at www.nationalservice.org.

Corporation for National and Community Service

AmeriCorps

- AmeriCorps*State and National
- AmeriCorps*VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)
- AmeriCorps*NCCC (the National Civilian Community Corps)

Learn and Serve America

- K-12
- Higher Education
- Community-based Programs

Senior Corps

- Foster Grandparents
- Senior Companions
- Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP)

The American Tradition of Service

“The lives that I have encountered and touched have given me a sense of pride and community among my fellow Americans. Like my own life, the lives I help to shape through my service in AmeriCorps hopefully will one day give back the same service to another generation of Americans.”

— Mia

Service is and always has been a vital force in American life.

Throughout our history, our nation has relied on the dedication and action of citizens. AmeriCorps is part of a long tradition of service that has included the Civilian Conservation Corps, the GI Bill, the Peace Corps, and the Points of Light Foundation. Following is a brief history of AmeriCorps.

1930s President Franklin D. Roosevelt creates the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). During the Depression, four million young people help restore the nation’s parks, revitalize the economy, and support their families.

1944 The GI Bill links service and education, offering educational opportunity to people who serve the nation during World War II.

1961 President John Kennedy creates the Peace Corps. Since then, more than 150,000 Americans have served as Peace Corps volunteers, meeting vital needs overseas and improving America with their new knowledge and spirit of citizenship.

1964 As part of the War on Poverty, President Lyndon B. Johnson creates VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), giving Americans opportunities to serve full-time to help thousands of low-income communities. In 1993, VISTA becomes part of AmeriCorps and is renamed “AmeriCorps*VISTA.”

1960s The Foster Grandparent Program, the Senior Companion Program, and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) are created to enable older American to use their experience, skills, and talents to meet community needs. Today, these programs constitute the National Senior Service Corps—which, along with Learn and Serve America, is AmeriCorps’ partner in the Corporation for National Service.

1970s and 1980s Young people get more opportunities to serve, with new local, state, and national programs like youth corps, conser-

vation corps, and service corps. Schools and colleges contribute to the service movement by incorporating service and education.

1990 President George Bush signs the National and Community Service Act of 1990. The legislation authorizes grants to schools to support service-learning and demonstration grants for national service programs to youth corps, nonprofits, and colleges and universities.

1992 With strong bipartisan support, the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) is established as part of an amendment to the 1992 Defense Appropriations Bill. The demonstration program is charged with expanding youth service efforts in communities negatively affected by military downsizing.

September 1993 President Bill Clinton signs the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, creating AmeriCorps and the Corporation for National and Community Service. VISTA and NCCC become part of AmeriCorps.

1994 Congress passes the King Holiday and Service Act of 1994, charging the Corporation for National and Community Service with taking the lead in organizing Martin Luther King Day as an annual day of service.

September 1994 The first class of AmeriCorps members—20,000 strong—begins serving in more than 1,000 communities.

April 1997 The Presidents' Summit for America's Future, chaired by General Colin Powell, brings together President Clinton, former Presidents Bush, Ford, and Carter, and Mrs. Reagan to recognize and expand the role of AmeriCorps and other service programs in meeting the needs of America's youth.

October 1999 AmeriCorps marks its five-year anniversary.

October 2000 The ranks of AmeriCorps members grows to more than 175,000. AmeriCorps celebrates the 35th anniversary of VISTA.

January 2002 President George W. Bush creates USA Freedom Corps and calls on all Americans to dedicate at least two years over a lifetime to serving.

One of the best ways to stay involved in service—and connect with AmeriCorps members around the nation—is to join AmeriCorps Alums. This organization advertises job openings, promotes service opportunities, and supports local alumni chapters around the country.

National AmeriCorps Association

1400 I Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 729-8180

e-mail:
alumni@americorpsalums.net
website:
www.lifetimeofservice.org

“AmeriCorps was the most rewarding experience I’ve ever had. Service will always be a part of my life.”
— Kathy

Life After AmeriCorps

Before you know it, your AmeriCorps service will come to an end. You may already be thinking about what you want to do, and how and where you can do it. As an AmeriCorps member, you’ll gain skills, become a more effective leader, and develop contacts that can help you for the rest of your life. AmeriCorps will open a lot of doors for you, but how will you decide which door to choose?

Making Decisions

At the end of your term of service with AmeriCorps, will you sign up for another year of AmeriCorps, or serve through another service organization, like the Peace Corps? Will you look for a job? Will you use your education award to attend college or graduate school? How will you build on the skills you’ve developed?

Next Steps

To help you sort out your options and make the best decision, AmeriCorps has prepared a handbook that may help you whether you’re thinking about getting a job, going to school, or doing another year of service. *Next Steps: Life After AmeriCorps* includes exercises to help you evaluate your accomplishments as an AmeriCorps member and figure out how to combine your skills and interests into a potential career path.

Specifically, *Next Steps* gives you tips on:

- writing a resume and interviewing effectively;
- identifying jobs in your areas of interest;
- using the web for your job search; and
- applying for college or graduate programs.

Ask your project director for a copy of *Next Steps* or download it from the AmeriCorps website at www.americorps.org/resources.

Continue Serving

Part of your pledge as an AmeriCorps member is to get things done “this year and beyond.” You have several options and resources if you want to continue to serve, such as:

- serving another term as an AmeriCorps member; talk with your project director, visit www.americorps.org, or call (800) 942-2677;
- leading teams of AmeriCorps members and programs as an AmeriCorps Leader; call (202) 606-5000, x164;
- applying to the Peace Corps; visit www.peacecorps.gov or call (800) 254-8540; and
- volunteering in your community; call the Voluntary Action Centers at (800) 879-5400, or visit www.volunteermatch.org or www.servenet.org.

Stay Connected

- Get involved with the National AmeriCorps Association; visit www.lifetimeofservice.org or call (202)729-8180;
- Help the national recruitment office spread the word about AmeriCorps; call (202) 606-5000, x566;
- Log-on to our web site, www.nationalservice.org, to find out what’s happening in the national service field. Our site has lots of great information, including:
 - Answers to frequently asked questions about the education award;
 - Information on how to get involved in national days of service like National Youth Service Day and Martin Luther King Day.

Regardless of the path you choose, as an AmeriCorps graduate you have the special skills needed to transform your communities and shape the future. You did it this year, now it’s time to keep your AmeriCorps pledge to carry this commitment with you this year and beyond. Good luck and stay in touch.

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“Now I know that one person really can make a difference.”

— Amy