

**APPLICANT FEEDBACK - Program Design**

2011 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

<b>Legal Applicant:</b> <b>Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, AFHA - Enhancing Assets to Benefit Communities</b>	<b>Application ID:</b> <b>11AC123594</b>
<b>Below are the comments from each External Peer Reviewer that read and evaluated the application. While Reviewers did engage in discussion about their evaluations, consensus was not required as part of their review. Therefore, there may be differing views in their feedback on the quality of the proposal.</b>	
<p><b>COMMENTS:</b> Three problems areas are clearly identified as unmet target community needs: environmental damage, deterioration of historic buildings, and economically distressed rural communities. A detailed description of each problem area is provided with supporting information from sources that include the U.S. Forest Service, Advisory Council of Historic Preservation, HUD, and 36 historical societies and sites in the target communities. The applicant appropriately conducted research and held public meetings to identify needs and issues and developed a strategic plan that included key input from a wide variety of community stakeholders and partners. The applicant’s value on appropriate backgrounds and qualifications are strong and clear as evidenced by their search for people with some training or skills in service areas that include forestry, wildlife biology, environmental studies, history, anthropology, and historic preservation with a preference that members have a college degree or have substantial life experience. Other qualifications include a strong work ethic, self-direction, personable, and able to work well in a team and with community volunteers. The applicant presents a comprehensive, well-rounded member training program that takes up to 15 percent of the member’s time and includes: an initial week of orientation, tours of service areas, initial skills training, and training about AmeriCorps service and civic responsibility; a second week of orientation and training at their service areas; skills training opportunities built into each service area; project specific training by service sites, partners, and other organizations like YouthBuild; and participation in Mountain State Leaders leadership training. The applicant states a consistent 100 percent enrollment and 90+ percent retention rate, and an increase in members each successive year during its four years of operation as an AmeriCorps program. The applicant outlines and details an impressive list of projects to be accomplished and sometimes designed by members in pursuit of two related program goals: environmental stewardship and community economic development. The member teams and examples of projects are: the conservation team will implement environmental stewardship projects that address monitoring, cleanup, and restoration of recreation sites negatively impacted by excess visitation and the development of interpretive trails and Leave No Trace training; and the heritage development team will contribute to community pride and awareness and improve tourism experience and visitation by developing heritage attractions and interpretation, improving tourist information, and developing and conducting thematic interpretive tours and children’s heritage activities.</p>	

**COMMENTS:** Overall, the applicant presents a good case for providing a meaningful and sustainable plan in the West Virginia area. The applicant presents a clear outline of three identified problems within a 16-county region of West Virginia. The applicant identifies an strong plan for recruiting and selecting members through the National AmeriCorps portal, local ads, news stories, e-mail lists, and employment bulletin boards. This should yield a diverse, well-rounded team with skills that are aligned with the service areas. Additionally, the applicant has a four-year history as an AmeriCorps program and reports a 100% enrollment and 90% retention rate for all four years. There is a sound evaluation plan that will lead to continued and thorough strategic planning and program design. This is accomplished through yearly evaluations with input from members, staff, board members, community members and even independent reviewers.

**COMMENTS:** The applicant indicates clear outcomes for the identified problems. Success will be defined by the member's ability to identify and implement actions that result in the success of other members and volunteers. Members will have the opportunity to develop networking and bargaining skills that will be useful in future careers and projects. The members selected based on the identified criteria in the narrative will have the basic education and skills needed to operate in the community to help resolve the identified problems. As the member becomes ingrained in the community, they will enhance these skills and education with knowledge derived from immersion in the communities and their cultures. The experience will develop strong leaders that are aware of their communities and the effects of their actions on their environment. The applicant identifies that the restoration, rehabilitation and environmental impacts have been seen in previous AmeriCorps projects. These accomplishments have provided the community with well-defined improvements based on the projects identified and developed. This proposal defines member success as the satisfactory completion of the task. Tasks are identified as changing a process that enhances the community on a whole. The applicant states that the volunteers' role is to support members in accomplishing projects in the community. Recruitment of volunteers happens within the community and is focused on the particular project that is being accomplished. The provision of a positive volunteer experience is one key for the member to accomplish while facilitating volunteer participation. These types of activities help develop well-rounded leaders with knowledge on how to accomplish diverse tasks and develop community participation and a sense of pride, which are a goal of this proposal. Because of the type of work to be accomplished and the integration of the community into the program, the applicant provides a strong platform for developing well-rounded and diverse teams to meet the goals. This mixing of residents and members facilitates the understanding of the culture and diversity of the region and communities where they work. This helps eliminate bias and misconceptions related to where people live or educational accomplishments. The applicant clearly identifies that the members will be recruited from the AmeriCorps portal, which provides a large pool of qualified candidates to select from for 23 positions. This allows for the hiring of individuals from across the United States and spreads knowledge of the issues of this community outside of the close geographic region and facilitates the tourism and growth this program is seeking to develop. The applicant identifies an ongoing education and training program that allows individuals to broaden their personal knowledge base. This program helps develop stronger and well-rounded members that are able to function in other areas, if and as the need arises. This also develops stronger leaders for future growth and activity participation. The applicant discusses the impact of the economy on the community and the exodus of the community youth to seek work elsewhere. This creates communities that will cease to exist due to attrition

and loss of support to keep the community viable. The identified goal is to build and develop new and renewable work that would sustain the community and create a reason to remain in the community. This goal supports the preservation of a community's culture and history.

**COMMENTS:** The applicant outlines a recruitment process from a variety of sources to ensure a pool of applicants with diverse backgrounds and training/experience in related service areas to enhance the success of the proposed projects. This is evidenced by the utilization of local ads, email lists, and employment bulletin boards. The applicant outlines a comprehensive orientation and training plan that highlights AmeriCorps, service roles, expectations, initial skills training as well as specific orientation and training at their service sites. Additionally all AmeriCorps members will participate in Mountain State Leaders leadership training. The applicant will ensure a positive experience for AmeriCorps members as they will be recognized and celebrated during their year of service. The applicant has a history of a 90% or better retention rate of AmeriCorps members in four years of prior operation. The applicant has a four-year history of successfully funding and carrying out an AmeriCorps program that increased members every successive year. The applicant also states they have exceeded required financial matches in all categories.