

## Overview

The United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) announce a collaborative effort designed to expand youth workforce development opportunities and strengthen transportation career pathways at the State level. The USDOT is statutorily required by The Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (“Section 1524 of MAP-21”) to encourage States and regional transportation planning agencies to use youth service and conservation corps to perform appropriate transportation-related projects.<sup>1</sup>



Qualified youth service and conservation corps include any program established by a State or local government or nonprofit organization that are capable of providing meaningful, full-time, productive experiences for individuals between the ages of 16 and 25 in an urban or

public works or transportation setting and gives participants a mix of job and life skills, education, training, and support services in addition to providing participants with the opportunity to develop citizenship values and skills through service to their communities and their country.

A State or regional transportation planning agency may enter into cooperative agreements with qualified youth service and conservation corps to perform work on scenic turn-out and overlook, recreational trail, transportation alternatives, bicycle and pedestrian, or safe routes to school projects. AmeriCorps has the proven ability to move this effort forward. By collaborating with State and regional transportation agencies to use AmeriCorps members in DOT-supported projects, States and municipalities can provide a ladder of economic and educational opportunity to disadvantaged youth—setting them on a pathway of success.

## Benefits of Utilizing AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps is a national service program that places thousands of mission-driven young adults into intensive service positions aimed to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement. AmeriCorps has had measureable impact on communities it has served and the participants who serve. AmeriCorps members learn valuable life skills, earn education awards, and develop an appreciation for civic engagement. AmeriCorps is an effective strategy to help increase the capacity of a State to meet its transportation needs, expand opportunities for young adults, and strengthen its civic infrastructure.

<sup>1</sup> Eligible projects are found under sections 162, 206, 213, and 217, of Title 23, United States Code. and under section 1404 of the SAFETEA-LU (119 Stat. 1228).

There are many AmeriCorps programs already engaged in DOT-supported work under the Recreational Trails Program (RTP). Typical activities include trail maintenance and restoration; construction of trails, trail bridges, and other structures; and other activities related to trail use (constructing and maintaining trailside and trailhead facilities). However, AmeriCorps members can also perform eligible activities under the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) and other Federal-aid highway programs. Most of the following eligible activities have been or are currently being performed by AmeriCorps members across the nation:

- Developing pedestrian and bicycle facilities including ensuring compliance with accessibility requirements;
- Pedestrian and bicycle amenities;
- Safe Routes to School projects and programs;
- Scenic turn-out and overlook construction;
- Trail conversion of abandoned railway corridors;
- Historic preservation and rehabilitation of historic transportation facilities;
- Environmental mitigation;
- Restoration and/or maintaining wildlife connectivity;
- Landscaping and streetscaping to complete transportation projects.

In addition, any project eligible under TAP or the RTP is also eligible under the Surface Transportation Program (STP). Some TAP-eligible projects may be eligible under the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program or the Highway Safety Improvement Program.

## Who Should Be Involved?

### State and Regional Transportation Planning Agencies

As the authorized agencies responsible for selecting projects using Federal-aid highway program funds, State DOTs and regional transportation planning agencies are key stakeholders. They develop their own competitive processes that allow eligible grant applicants to submit projects for funding. These agencies have the decision-making authority in regard to their formula funding. USDOT encourages State DOTs and these agencies to use these corps through their competitive project selection processes. Many States have had this strategy such as Alaska, California, Maine, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Wyoming.

Collaboration with the other key stakeholders is essential for a State engagement strategy to be effective. While RTP funds are typically administered through a resource agency and not a transportation agency, both agencies are stakeholders and should be included in discussions to implement Section 1524 of MAP-21.

AmeriCorps has demonstrated success in recruiting and engaging young people in service, including those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds. AmeriCorps programs have many benefits that are particularly relevant to this population:

- Service develops hard and soft skills that translate directly to the workforce.
- Most AmeriCorps members feel like they will be better equipped in the workforce after serving and that their service will benefit their future educational, professional, or civic endeavors.
- AmeriCorps provides each member with a post-service education award (up to \$5,730 for 1,700 hours of service in a year) that can be used to pay for education and related expenses, including student loans.
- AmeriCorps members may have access to child care, health care, and student loan forbearance.
- Volunteers have higher odds of finding a job after being out of work than non-volunteers, creating a pathway to employment.

## State Service Commissions

Governor-appointed State service commissions play a key role in determining how national service resources are used in their States with approximately two-thirds of AmeriCorps grant funding going to the State service commissions. CNCS' State offices, together with State service commissions, make up CNCS's State infrastructure. Some key features of CNCS' State infrastructure particularly relevant to the development of a State engagement strategy include:

- State service commissions have a wealth of experience in working with youth service and conservation corps and can identify organizations that have the capacity to provide DOT-eligible activities.
- State service commissions, collaborating with transportation authorities, are a key stakeholder in getting the word out about the connection between transportation projects and AmeriCorps programs.
- State service commissions are available to partner with and support the effort. This might include such things as training and technical assistance, outreach to other government agencies, or outreach to nonprofit organizations.
- In most States, the State service commission is part of the State government, making the link between State government and communities more direct. This is important in developing or enhancing the State outreach strategy.
- State service commissions provide the connection in a State-Federal partnership that maximizes the power of citizens to solve problems and strengthen communities.
- State service commissions can collaborate with transportation authorities on DOT-funded grant competitions, as necessary.

## Qualified Youth Service and Conservation Corps

Youth service and conservation corps harness the power of youth and young adults to tackle some of America's greatest challenges and transform their own lives in the process. They provide a wealth of resource conservation and infrastructure improvement to the nation. Many of these corps members are also AmeriCorps members. The job training and life skills these youth learn while serving provides them with a ladder of economic opportunity that will serve them well as they strive to reach their professional and educational goals.

## How Does My State Get Started?

Many States across the nation have already engaged youth service and conservation corps and are successfully using AmeriCorps members on their DOT-supported projects. From interagency agreements directly with transportation authorities to partnering with youth service and conservation corps during the competitive process to legislative action, what becomes clear is that there are many pathways to engage youth service and conservation corps. The first step in developing a State engagement strategy is to develop relationships key between key stakeholders. Collaboration among all the key stakeholders is essential for an effective strategy. Additional considerations are outlined below.



### **For Transportation Authorities:**

- Meet with governor-appointed State service commission staff to learn more about AmeriCorps and all of the DOT-eligible activities members can perform.
- Develop a process to consider grant applicants who partner with youth service or conservation corps. Each State may approach this differently. Several States have already done this and can provide a framework for those that have not.
- Reach out to other State transportation agencies who have begun the process to glean lessons learned.

### **For State Service Commissions:**

- Meet with State transportation officials to become familiar with your State's Federal-aid highway program, particularly the categories that have projects that are appropriate for AmeriCorps. Find out: What does the competitive process entail? Who is eligible to apply? What activities is your State prioritizing?
- Educate State transportation officials on what DOT-eligible activities AmeriCorps members can do and what the benefits of using AmeriCorps members are: Corps can provide job skills and economic opportunities to disadvantaged populations, can recruit from a national pool of applicants, can lead to future careers in public service, etc.
- Notify organizations in your network of the potential funding available through the Federal-aid highway program and provide support to access the funds.
- Reach out to other State service commissions that have already begun the process to glean lessons learned.

### **For Youth Service and Conservation Corps:**

- Reach out to the State service commissions to help facilitate the process.
- Educate State and Federal transportation authorities on the benefits of using AmeriCorps members in DOT-supported projects.
- If you have research to support your work, share it with key stakeholders.

There is momentum to use national service as a strategy to provide access to opportunities--strengthening transportation career pathways and youth workforce development partnerships. USDOT and CNCS encourage every State to use AmeriCorps members in their DOT-supported projects and fully support the effort. Use the following links to begin engaging key stakeholders.

### **Transportation**

- [MAP-21 §1524 Questions and Answers](#)
- [Transportation Alternatives Program](#)
- [Recreational Trails Program Administrators](#)
- [Transportation Alternatives Data Exchange](#)
- [State Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinators](#)
- [National Center for Safe Routes to School](#)
- [FTA Workforce NOFA](#)

### **National Service**

- [State Service Commissions](#)
- [AmeriCorps](#)

### **Youth Service and Conservation Corps**

- [Corps](#)