

Service Makes Sense!

**For Students with Disabilities:
National Service Programs as a Stepping Stone to Employment**



NextSTEP 
National Service To Employment Project

“Service Makes Sense! For Students with Disabilities: National Service Programs as a Stepping Stone to Employment” is produced by the National Service to Employment Project (NextSTEP). For more information, please contact:

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In this booklet you'll learn:

- About national service programs and the type of work people perform
- How you can gain work experience, develop skills and build networks by being part of a service program - stepping stones for landing a job
- How service experiences help people with disabilities develop the advocacy skills and approaches they'll need as an employee
- The many benefits - personal and professional - that come with participating in service
- How to learn more about service and how to start exploring the opportunities - where they are, what they are
- How service can provide an opportunity to make a difference in your community
- Answers to commonly asked questions



What are national service programs?

National service programs are funded through the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), a federal agency. CNCS funded service programs include many programs you have probably heard of, such as AmeriCorps VISTA, City Year and Habitat for Humanity, Foster Grandparents, among many others.

There are many different programs, with different names, but they're all part of CNCS. This national network of hundreds of programs throughout the U.S is often referred to as "the domestic Peace Corps" since all members serve only in the U.S.

One branch of CNCS, AmeriCorps, provides programs with structured opportunities for adults of all ages, with and without disabilities, to serve in situations where they:

- Gain work experience to add to a resume
- Develop important skills for getting a job and being successful on a job. These include:
 - Finding the right opportunity that matches your skills and interests
 - Completing an application and an interview
 - Learning and practicing the self-advocacy skills essential to landing a job and obtaining needed accommodations
- Make connections and build relationships they can use to help them find a job after service
- Develop work-related skills, important to future jobs, such as being part of a team, the role of "soft skills", communication style, and fitting into the organizational culture

Participants in AmeriCorps programs are eligible for a living allowance to help defray their costs while in service. They also can access health care and childcare. Individuals who complete their service receive the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award that can be used for future education or to pay back student loans.

What would I do?

AmeriCorps State/National members serve in programs related to education, public safety, health, and the environment. Members work in *teams*, full-time or part-time, for one year or during the summer for City Year, Habitat for Humanity, the American Red Cross, or Public Allies, among many others.

- AmeriCorps State/National members work in their local community
- Examples of work done include tutoring, building homes, clearing trails and disaster preparedness/relief but there are many other possibilities
- Team members represent a wide range of ages and the service programs in which they serve address people of all ages

AmeriCorps VISTA members work *individually* at nonprofits, religious organizations, community groups and public agencies, helping these organizations to create and expand programs serving low-income people. There are AmeriCorps VISTA programs in many locations across the country.

- VISTA programs are ideal for either a college graduate or for someone with a few years of work experience and skills
- VISTA projects are suited to someone who is an organizer, a resource-builder and/or a self-starter and who is patient enough to work on a project that might not show results quickly.
- VISTA members generally do not provide direct services, such as tutoring children or building homes. Instead, they focus on helping an organization increase its own capacity - to fight illiteracy, improve health services, foster economic development and otherwise assist low-income communities.
- Examples of work include: creating an adult literacy awareness campaign and recruiting volunteer tutors; organizing shelter and job opportunities for victims of disaster.

AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps) members work as part of a *team*, full-time, at one of several residential locations (Denver, Colorado; Sacramento, California; Perry Point, Maryland; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Vinton, Iowa). Members complete service programs throughout the region they are assigned, working in partnership with non-profits, local municipalities, state governments, federal government, national or state parks and schools.

- NCCC is suited to those who like hands-on work in one of the following areas: clearing trails, providing disaster relief, renovating housing, tutoring kids and are interested in doing a variety of projects. These are young adults looking to relocate and travel during their service term and willing to live in a dorm.
- Examples of work include rebuilding homes, organizing volunteers to help after a national disaster, handing out groceries to families in need, helping with programs at a Boys and Girls Club.
- NCCC members are between the ages of 17-24



Who can serve?

No matter the age, background, education, interests, experiences or abilities, CNCS has a program suited to almost anyone. Some young adults do national service right out of high school while others participate after a post-secondary education.

AmeriCorps members must:

- Be at least 17 years old
- Be a U.S. citizen, U.S. national, or legal permanent U.S. resident
- Have a high school diploma, or be willing to work towards one or its equivalent (e.g. certificate of completion)

Some programs may require individuals to complete a background check.

The ideal candidate is someone whose employment goals fit the opportunities available in service.

What is the time commitment?

Time commitments vary by program and project. Below is a brief overview of some of the differences:

- **AmeriCorps State/National:** It depends on the program but most assignments are fulltime for one year (1700 hours). However, there are also opportunities for half-time (900 hours), reduced half-time (675 hours), quarter-time (450 hours), or minimum-time (300 hours).
- **AmeriCorps VISTA:** All VISTA positions are full-time (1700 hours) year-long engagements. The VISTA summer program is the only exception, with the engagement lasting between 8-12 weeks, but still being a full-time commitment.
- **AmeriCorps NCCC:** AmeriCorps NCCC requires an intensive, 10-month commitment.



“Everyone says you need experience or no one will hire you. One can get experience from volunteer service.”

- AmeriCorps Member

How do I get started?

Approach the research and decision about whether to participate in service the same way you would approach a job search. Investigate what openings are available and think about how they match your interests and future goals. Finding the right fit is one key to success. There are so many AmeriCorps programs, both in-state and out-of-state and so many possibilities. As you search, it will help to keep some general guidelines in mind:

It takes work to find work! If you follow the steps described below, you will be able to learn more about the big picture of AmeriCorps programs and then about specific opportunities. You'll be able to read about what the work is, the time commitment and when to apply, among other information available.

- Remember: you are in the driver's seat. This means that, in addition to "doing your homework", you'll need to do follow up and even do some advocating for yourself, once you submit an application.
 - Think of this as practice for finding a job later on --- looking for available openings, preparing the necessary documents (resume, application, references), staying in touch to check on the status of your application.
- Be persistent! It really does pay off to persevere. Keep in mind that programs have many applicants so you need to remind them of your interest.
- The AmeriCorps websites also have links called "Stories of Service" where you can read what members, past and present, have had to say about their work, their experiences and the benefits. And, you can read what people with disabilities who have served have to say. www.serviceandinclusion.org/index.php?page=stories_snip

Talk to the person at your school who is helping you plan for your future after school. This might be a guidance counselor, special educator and/or vocational rehabilitation counselor. It will help a lot to have the support, encouragement and help of a school staff member.

- Consider getting hands-on experience with service, by taking part

"They selected me! I went to the interview and it was the very first time I've ever had an interview."

- AmeriCorps Member

in a school sponsored service program. Get the assistance of your school counselor in finding out about school-based community service internships and programs; get involved.

- Another possibility: take part in a service project happening in your community (for example, working at a food bank). Martin Luther King Day and 9/11 are both national days of service, so there are typically service events that are happening through out the community,
- You can also check with your state's Service Commission about service fairs where multiple service programs may be recruiting members. (Consult the Resources section for website links for locating your state's commission.)

Finally, if you do become a part of an AmeriCorps program, **make the most of the experience as a stepping stone** to employment:

- Take part in any skill-building events that might be offered over the course of the program but may not be required. For example, a session on how to write a resume might be offered.
- Make the most of your relationship with your supervisor - ask for feedback and for advice on how to improve your skills and make the most of the entire service experience.
- Don't be shy about asking for any accommodations you need to be successful on the job. Again, think of this as practice for the "real world" and how you will advocate for yourself.
- Things might not always go the way you want; that's normal in the work world and this is a great way to "try things out" in a structured environment.
- Think about how your service experience can relate to the job you want after service. As you proceed through your year, keep track of the people you've met, the connections you've made. This network can be very useful to you when you leave service.



How do I find out more about AmeriCorps program opportunities?

The steps below will lead you to locations to learn about different types of AmeriCorps (and non-AmeriCorps) possibilities. You will do a bit of “clicking through” but will be rewarded with lots of detailed information about the possibilities - what they involve and what they require.

1. Go to the website: www.nationalservice.gov/for_individuals/overview/index.asp This is the “homepage” for individuals interested in doing national service. There are many links on the left-hand side of the page that will lead you to information about the benefits of service and more.

2. After you read some basic information, you may want to start learning about specific opportunities in your state. Go to the website: www.americorps.gov/for_individuals/ready/index.asp and you will be able to click on Steps 1 and 2 to find opportunities in your state and in your interest area. Or, you can click on Step 2 only to find out about some of the AmeriCorps possibilities in your state (or any other state). Further down on this same page, you can follow the links to learn more about “Which Program Is Right for Me?”

3. If you are interested in opportunities specific to your community or state, visit: <http://www.nationalservice.gov/> and search ‘Find a Volunteer Opportunity’ by ‘Your Location’.

4. Once you get to the page with the list of possibilities from your search, you can click on each individual listing to go to their website. There you will learn all you need to know about the opportunity: about the organization, member duties, program benefits, skills and other requirements. There is even a link for applying.

5. Another great way to find opportunities in your state is to find them on your state’s service commission’s website. As background, each state has a Service Commission which acts as a coordinator of service programs in the state, a provider of support to national service programs, and the prime administrator of AmeriCorps*State grants.

- You can learn about non-AmeriCorps volunteer and service opportunities on the state service commission sites. For example, in MA, the service commission is called the MA Service Alliance (www.mass-service.org) On this site, there is a link called “Connect and Serve” which will take you to volunteer opportunities in MA that are not AmeriCorps programs.
- To find your state’s Service Commission, go to: www.nationalservice.gov/about/contact/statecommission.asp

6. Many state commissions on national and community service have disability coordinators who are responsible for ensuring that individuals with disabilities have the opportunity to actively participate in national service programs. These staff can be helpful to families as they investigate and participate in service programs. You can find a listing of the Disability Coordinator for your state, along with contact information at www.serviceandinclusion.org/index.php?page=coordinators





Will service participation affect Social Security benefits?

AmeriCorps volunteers receive a living allowance that can affect Social Security benefits. Below is a general overview of how benefits are affected but you can get details by contacting the National Service Inclusion Project or the Work Incentive Planning Assistance project in your state (see Resources).

	AmeriCorps State/ National	AmeriCorps VISTA
Is the living stipend considered income if I am receiving SSI?	No	No
Is the living stipend considered income if I am receiving SSDI?	Yes. <i>Can count toward Substantial Gainful Activity, but may be offset by work incentives.</i>	No

Summing up

AmeriCorps programs are not for everybody but they are right for the person who is interested in helping others - all while building their own confidence, skills and work experiences. There are a wide variety of possibilities to learn about, in your own state and across the country. The Resources Section includes links to sites where you can find more information about how people with disabilities have, and are, serving and where you can learn more about impact on benefits.

Resources

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) engages more than 5 million Americans in service every year.

CNCS website: www.nationalservice.gov

Service stories: www.nationalservice.gov/for_individual/current/stories.asp

The National Service to Employment Project (NextSTEP) conducts research, provides technical assistance, and creates demonstration projects focusing on people with disabilities in volunteer and community-service roles.

NextSTEP website: www.serviceandinclusion.org/nextstep

Facebook: www.facebook.com/service2employ

Twitter: @Service2Employ

The National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP) provides training and technical service to help national service programs include individuals with disabilities as active participants.

NSIP website: www.serviceandinclusion.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/serviceandinclusion

Service stories (audio): www.serviceandinclusion.org/index.php?page=participants

State Service Commissions manage, monitor and evaluate AmeriCorps programs. State Service Commissions are also charged with encouraging volunteering in their states and often administer special volunteer initiatives. Locate your state's service commission at:

www.nationalservice.gov/about/contact/statecommission.asp



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