



## Policy Brief

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# Civic Apprenticeship: Build The Talent Pipeline For The Nonprofit Sector By Expanding National Service And Recognizing Its Role In Workforce Development

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**Abstract:** National service operates as a workforce development system for nonprofits by offering individuals a paid opportunity to develop real-world skills through hands-on service. A service year before, during, or after college – or as a way to get back on track – gives Americans of all ages, but especially young adults, the chance to transform their lives, make an impact in their community, and become the active citizens and leaders our nation needs.

**Keywords:** national service, workforce development, nonprofit employment

Nonprofit organizations are essential to the future of the nation, including building strong and healthy communities, preparing the future workforce, giving voice to underrepresented groups, and playing many other vital roles. As an economic engine, the 1.54 million tax-exempt organizations in the US contributed an estimated \$1 trillion to the US economy in 2016, more than five percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>1</sup>

To do this, the sector leverages the volunteer time of a quarter of the adult population, valued at \$193 billion, according to Independent Sector, and employs

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<sup>1</sup> The NCCS Project Team. (2020, June). *The Nonprofit Sector in Brief 2019*. Retrieved from Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics: <https://nccs.urban.org/publication/nonprofit-sector-brief-2019#highlights>.

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more than 10% of the private sector workforce.<sup>2</sup> According to the Johns Hopkins Nonprofit Employment Project, nonprofit employees represent the third largest private-sector workforce in the US, behind only retail trade and manufacturing.<sup>3</sup> In 24 states and DC, nonprofits actually employ more workers than all the branches of manufacturing combined. Nonprofits constitute a major industry in more than three-quarters of all US counties.

Despite their prominence as employers, nonprofits are rarely considered when workforce policies are developed. For example, President Trump's task force on apprenticeship expansion included a dozen industry representatives but no organization representing nonprofit employers.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, while the future of work is increasingly a subject of discussion, nonprofits are rarely mentioned in reports except in the context of their role developing workers for other industries.

In fact, there is reason to believe that nonprofits are likely to struggle in the future securing the talent they need. According to proprietary data from ZipRecruiter, an online employment marketplace, while nonprofit postings outpaced growth in both the technology and business sectors, applicants for nonprofit jobs declined to a ratio of just one opening per applicant, far below the applicant ratio in other industries.<sup>5</sup> The education and health care fields, where many nonprofits operate, top the list of industries with the most job openings per unemployed worker, and workforce needs in these areas are expected to be among the fastest growing, according to the Occupational Outlook Handbook.<sup>6</sup>

While nonprofits compete with business for workers in many fields including technology and executive management, the vast majority of nonprofits surveyed have no formal recruitment or retention strategy.<sup>7</sup> These limitations are likely to become exacerbated as the aging population leaves the workforce and creates greater demands for many services that nonprofit organizations typically provide older adults. Other “future of work” trends suggest an increased need for

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2 Independent Sector. (2016, December 14). *State Profile – Pennsylvania*. Retrieved from Independent Sector: <https://independentsector.org/resource/state-profile-pennsylvania/>.

3 Salamon, L. M. (2018). *Nonprofits: America's third largest workforce*. Johns Hopkins University.

4 Task Force on Apprenticeship Expansion. (2018). *Final Report to: The President of the United States*. Task Force on Apprenticeship Expansion.

5 Marino, J. (2018, October 17). *Dwindling Talent Could Be the Nonprofit Nonstarter*. Retrieved from ZipRecruiter Blog: <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/blog/talent-shortage-nonprofit-nonstarter/>.

6 Ivanova, I. (2019, February 4). These are the industries with the biggest labor shortages. *CBS News*.

7 Nonprofit HR. (2017). *2017 Nonprofit Employment Practices Survey*. Retrieved from Nonprofit HR: <https://www.nonprofithr.com/2017-nep-survey-new/>.

nonprofits including COVID-19 response and recovery, an escalating rate of large-scale emergencies requiring disaster response resources, growth in early childhood programs due to universal preschool policies and demand for child care, development of community-based alternatives to incarceration, and of course, preparing workers for employment in technology and other fields.

For these reasons, policymakers can no longer neglect the workforce development needs of nonprofit organizations.

## 1 A *De Facto* Workforce Development System For Nonprofits

National service operates as a workforce development system for nonprofits by offering individuals a paid opportunity to develop real-world skills through hands-on service. A service year before, during, or after college—or as a way to get back on track—gives Americans of all ages, but especially young adults, the chance to transform their lives, make an impact in their community, and become the active citizens and leaders our nation needs.<sup>8</sup>

While rarely recognized as such, national service is a kind of “civic apprenticeship” that combines work-based learning and career development with a motivating social purpose. The evidence shows that regardless of background, a young person in full-time service learns workplace behaviors and skills, experiences a specific field, makes professional connections, and develops the pride that comes with a paycheck. Research demonstrates that the sense of purpose and direction developed through these experiences can inspire a young adult to pursue further education or advance on a career path, leading to future economic success, often in public service fields that are experiencing talent shortages.<sup>9</sup>

While building skills that can be useful in either the public or private sector—including for-profit businesses—national service opportunities are in fact a common pathway to a set of public service careers for which limited dedicated workforce development programs exist. These include a variety of nonprofit careers (50% of VISTA alums work in the nonprofit sector), conservation (12% of park service employees come from the Student Conservation Association),

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<sup>8</sup> Friedman, E., et al. (2016). *New Methods for Assessing AmeriCorps Alumni Outcomes: Final Survey Technical Report*. (Prepared for the Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Evaluation). Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates Inc. Retrieved from [https://nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/evidenceexchange/FR\\_AmeriCorpsAlumniOutcomesFinalTechReport.pdf](https://nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/evidenceexchange/FR_AmeriCorpsAlumniOutcomesFinalTechReport.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2015). *Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

education and youth development (teacher preparation programs recruit heavily from AmeriCorps), and disaster response (more than half of last year's FEMA Corps alums went on to careers in emergency management). Research shows that out-of-work individuals who volunteer have a 27% higher likelihood of becoming employed, compared with others who do not volunteer. The relationship between volunteering and employment is strongest for individuals without a high school diploma and persons living in rural areas.<sup>10</sup>

Studies of AmeriCorps, the largest federal national service program, confirm that corps members build both civic and 21st century job skills (such as problem solving, communication, and project management), and are highly likely to pursue careers in public service.<sup>11, 12</sup> Recent research by Burning Glass, comparing the resumes of individuals who have completed a service year with a matched comparison group, revealed distinct patterns that differentiate service year alumni from their peers, both in the careers they forge and in the skills they develop.<sup>13</sup> For example, service year alums go on to complete bachelor's degrees at higher rates than their peers, are more likely than their peers to work in education and community and social services occupations, and are more likely than their peers to advertise skills related to leadership and organization. And while service year alums remain more concentrated in lower-paying career areas such as education and social services, service year alums without bachelor's degrees earn slightly more than their similarly educated peers five, seven, and 10 years after service.

Research shows that in some cases, organizations create new jobs in order to retain the young people who serve with them.<sup>14</sup> However, because national service programs cannot guarantee a job upon completion, they have not been recognized as a form of on-the-job training. And because AmeriCorps is administered by the AmeriCorps agency (formerly known as the Corporation for National

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**10** Spera, C., Ghertner, R., Nerino, A., & DiTommaso, A. (2015). Out of work? Volunteers Have Higher Odds of Getting Back to Work. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 44(5), 886–907. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764015605928>.

**11** JBS International. (2015). *National Service Systematic Review and Synthesis of National Service Literature*. Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service.

**12** Abt Associates Inc. (2008). *Still Serving: Measuring the Eight-Year Impact of AmeriCorps on Alumni*. Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service. Retrieved from [https://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/08\\_0513\\_longstudy\\_executive.pdf](https://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/08_0513_longstudy_executive.pdf).

**13** Burning Glass Technologies. (2018). *Pathways After Service: Education and Career Outcomes of Service Year Alumni*. Washington, DC: Service Year Alliance. Retrieved from <https://www.burning-glass.com/wp-content/uploads/Pathways-After-Service-Service-Year-Burning-Glass.pdf>.

**14** McFadden, E. S., Smith, K. L., & Bang, B. (2016). *AmeriCorps: Arizona's Pipeline to Employment*. Arizona State University.

and Community Service) rather than the Department of Labor or Department of Education, it is not considered a workforce development program.<sup>15</sup>

## 2 Expand “Civic Apprenticeship” Opportunities Through National Service

Over the last several years, national service has begun to rise in prominence on the public agenda, in part due to rising concerns about societal divides and college debt. Polls show strong bipartisan support for national service. In the recent election, presidential candidates for the first time offered national service proposals early in the primary season, talking about them on national television. Congressional leaders have proposed legislation to increase AmeriCorps to one million positions and provide increased college access to those who serve. Prominent Americans are backing efforts to make a year of service a common expectation and opportunity. A bi-partisan federal commission on military, national, and public service recommended universal civilian national service.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, a reauthorization of the National and Community Service and the Domestic Volunteer Service Acts, which layout the framework for AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps is long overdue (they were last reauthorized in 2009).<sup>17</sup>

As federal, state, and local policymakers work to shape national service legislation, they should do so with a view toward developing the future workforce of the nonprofit sector. Policies could include:

- Aligning expansion with workforce needs within the nonprofit sector;
- Encouraging higher education and other partnerships to offer formal credentials that recognize postsecondary learning through national service;
- Directing government agencies to develop national service programs to address priority needs within their jurisdictions, and to integrate specific job skill development into the programs;
- Making national service a form of workforce development parallel to on-the-job training and apprenticeship, or creating a subcategory within either program;

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<sup>15</sup> Cielinski, A. (2018). *A Primer on Federal Employment and Training Programs for Human Services Advocates*. CLASP.

<sup>16</sup> *Inspired to Service: The Final Report of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service* (March 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.inspire2serve.gov/sites/default/files/final-report/Final%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. (2019). *Interim Report*. Arlington, VA: National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service.

- Targeting communities with significant needs and a declining job base for increased national service funding;
- Prioritizing programs that engage opportunity youth and others with barriers to employment;
- Providing preferences for AmeriCorps grants to programs that have partnerships with higher education institutions, workforce development organizations, or employers; and
- Passing proposed legislation such as the Nonprofit and Community Solutions Act of 2010 and the Cultivating Opportunity and Response to the Pandemic through Service (CORPS) Act.

Growth of national service, based on current experience, would have a positive impact on the nonprofit workforce, providing both increased available human capital while preparing corps members for future work in the sector. However, it could have an even greater impact if policymakers act with this intention.