

# At Issue:

## Should AmeriCorps be eliminated?



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Americans always have organized to help their neighbors. The government should stop paying for service through AmeriCorps. The budget crisis is reason enough to terminate AmeriCorps — and even the Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees AmeriCorps.

Washington has funded many service, training and “volunteer” initiatives, which usually achieve some good but also plenty of bad. Journalist Jim Bovard has documented political abuse, waste and low priority work at AmeriCorps. Inexplicably, the Obama administration fired the corporation’s inspector general while Congress cut funding for his office.

Waste and inefficiency are inevitable because free labor will be treated like a free good. But even seemingly productive jobs won’t necessarily produce significant social benefits.

The critical question is not the cost-benefit ratio but the opportunity cost of AmeriCorps funding. Could the resources be better spent elsewhere? There is no reason to believe that a dollar for “national service” yields more good than an additional dollar spent on medical research or business investment.

Indeed, service comes in many forms. Being paid by Uncle Sam to shelve books in a library or teach in a public school is no more laudable than being paid by the local used book store or private school. Moreover, who should do the giving? It might be simpler if Washington empties pockets nationwide, giving either grants or labor to charity. But the right way is for individuals to directly aid deserving groups.

Nor is dependence on government healthy for private charities. Although charities get to train publicly funded volunteers, government inevitably will favor some activities. Such preferences subtly pressure organizations to adjust their mission to ensure eligibility for funding. An early review by Public/Private Ventures, a nonprofit that seeks to improve the effectiveness of anti-poverty programs, noted that the corporation aggressively shaped service programs. An assessment in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* found that those involved sought to “influence the type of implementation process that fits their own political interests.”

Moreover, AmeriCorps is likely to encourage people to further abdicate their civic responsibilities. Federally funded service makes it less necessary for people to contribute and volunteer. People won’t do more if they perceive no need to do so, and they will see less need if Washington provides charities with “volunteers.”

Never content to wait for government to act, Americans always have worked with families, friends and neighbors to help those around them. Uncle Sam should stop paying them to help today.



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The vast majority of volunteers act without support from government, and that’s the way it should be. Every year, 63 million Americans strengthen their communities by leading scout troops or coaching soccer, raising money for band uniforms or leading museum tours. These are good things, and government doesn’t need to interfere.

On the other hand, many functions widely understood to be public priorities are in desperate need of an affordable source of dedicated human capital. For example, providing a quality education is labor intensive, particularly in high-poverty schools where many children need extra supports. National service can be a key part of a strategy to turn around failing schools. That’s why the widely acclaimed Diplomas Now initiative deploys City Year corps members to take action when middle school students exhibit early warning signs of dropping out.

In other cases, national service members play a critical role organizing community volunteers. For example, in Madison, Wis., the Schools of Hope initiative has wiped out racial disparities in reading with community and college volunteer tutors recruited and supervised by national service members. This kind of low-cost intervention saves significant public funding down the road.

AmeriCorps funding is key to both City Year and Schools of Hope. AmeriCorps members serve full time (or make a substantial part-time commitment) and receive a modest stipend and education award in return. In addition to serving in schools, AmeriCorps members aid community health centers, early-childhood programs and college access initiatives, address a wide range of locally determined needs. In fact, AmeriCorps figures prominently in a Joplin, Mo., monument to the volunteers who helped its post-tornado recovery.

Not only is AmeriCorps a low-cost way to direct human resources to public problems but it also creates badly needed entry jobs for priority populations. Most AmeriCorps positions are filled by young adults — a group facing the highest rates of unemployment. Older adults who have more to give after retirement also serve — and by so doing, stay healthy and independent. A new priority for AmeriCorps is to engage veterans, a population suffering from high rates of unemployment and a strong desire to serve their communities.

At a time when nonprofit organizations are stretched thin with the weak economy, too many schools are struggling and millions of Americans are out of work and ready to serve, we should be expanding AmeriCorps, not eliminating it.