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National Service Getting Grants Done

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Early on the morning of September 12, 800 new national service corps participants strode onto the White House grounds, anticipating a noon ceremony in which they'd be sworn in by President Clinton, as thousands of others joined in via satellite. One catch, though. Earlier that morning, Frank Eugene Corder had also entered the grounds—over the gates, not through them—in his Cessna 150 aircraft, which crashed just short of his apparent target, the president's bedroom.

In addition to guaranteeing himself a distinguished spot on history's roster of would-be assassins, Corder—who perished on impact—had also made himself one giant pain in the ass of the Corporation for National Service. The plane's wreckage sat precisely where the ceremony had been mapped out. As tourists on Pennsylvania Avenue stared at the unlikely sight of gray-T-shirted youths playing hacky-sack just a hacky-sack's toss from the walls of the executive mansion, the ceremony was hastily rearranged. "It's killing us," one Corporation staffer said of the wreck.

The show did go on, however, just as the National Service Trust Act beat an unexpected filibuster to become law last fall, just as a program with 20,000 participants was built in less than a year.

Now the tough part. Eli Segal, Clinton's pick to steer the service program, is carrying out his mandate to create a decentralized program. This approach has many advantages, such as avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy, building on the informed experience of existing community programs, and emphasizing initiative on all levels. But while plane crashes and congressional critics were the enemy known, the Corporation now faces a much broader battle.
AmeriCorps is not any particular program, but an enormous consortium of large and small grantees. "It's tricky," Segal says, "but it's no trickier than any other bank investing in their programs. If they do well, we'll invest more in them in future years. If not, we'll be tough." But with 20,000 AmeriCorps members arriving this fall at thousands of individual projects across the country, the Corporation's raging controversies and potential land mines are a world away from Washington. That's precisely the point. And precisely the risk.

Now, with legislation passed and ink still wet on the grant checks, eyes turn to "the field," the nation's service community, on whose shoulders the fate of AmeriCorps truly rests. The Corporation issued a total of 368 national and state grants to applicants as diverse as the Department of Agriculture, which will field 1,200 volunteers, and the Philadelphia Bar Foundation, which this year has just one. Some service agendas, such as those of Boston's City Year and Habitat for Humanity, neatly mesh with the AmeriCorps identity; indeed, the Boston-based youth corps is one of the President's favored programs, chosen as a model upon which AmeriCorps was built.

Other grantees, such as Teach for America, another high-profile corps, and Public Allies, an organization that recruits and trains young leaders, fit within the AmeriCorps framework, but have spent dozens of hours negotiating to reconcile the details. "It's difficult," says Dan Porter, the teaching corps' former president, "because they'll say, 'We want results; we want you to show how students are being impacted.' That's asking Teach for America for something that the teaching profession itself is unable to fully grasp. I think that both TFA and the Corporation are trying to grow and become stable entities. So you have this dance between the two of them—they're lurching forward and we're lurching forward. It's sometimes a little rocky."

Teach for America received a $2 million grant to defray costs of recruiting and training its teachers. Salaries are paid by the districts where the corps members, usually fresh from college, teach. This arrangement doesn't neatly fit the AmeriCorps model of minimum-wage stipends plus $4,750 in educational awards, but, to the Corporation's credit, it has tailor-made financial deals with a number of grantees. The Philadelphia Public Interest Fellowship at the Philadelphia Bar Foundation, for example, convinced seven of the city's top law firms to give incoming associates a $60,000, half-pay deferment so the new lawyers can work for public interest groups. With salaries usually topping $60,000, half-pay is plenty to live on.

The Corporation picks up any interest on school loans that accrues in the year of service, plus $4,750 toward the principal. Public Allies, a nonprofit widely recognized for its innovation, also has struggled to adapt to AmeriCorps' policies; the organization received $1.2 million in funding for placements of young people in public service internships. "It's forced us to limit what we do, because we're growing so quickly. It has made us clearly define job descriptions; we now have an evaluation director," says Magda Escobar, National Program Manager. Escobar believes that the grant ultimately will strengthen the program, but other governmental restrictions have significantly impacted Public Allies' placements: Because the Corporation declined to fund advocacy and policy initiatives, this year "allies" are not working for nonprofit groups such as the Advocacy.

Here's who got the GOODS . . .

1994 AmeriCorps State and National Direct Grantees

NATIONAL DIRECT
The Corporation for National Service made 57 grants directly to federal agencies and national nonprofits, including 10 planning grants and 47 operational grants.

WHO GOT THE MOST? (in millions)
$3.2 . . . . . . . . . . . Delta Service Corps
$2.8 . . . . . . . . . . . City Year
$2.6 . . . . . . . . . . . Dept. of Agriculture
$2.06 . . . . . . . . . . . Dept. of Interior
$2.05 . . . . . . . . . . . Navajo Nation
$2.0 . . . . . . . . . . . Teach for America

WHO GOT THE LEAST? (in dollars)
$2,050 . . . . . . . . . . . Philadelphia Bar Foundation

STATE GRANTS
A total of 311 State AmeriCorps grants were awarded to 302 local programs, including $1.5 million in set-asides for both tribes and territories.

WHO GOT THE MOST? (in millions)
$3.6 . . . . . . . . . . . City Year (MA)
$3.0 . . . . . . . . . . . Washington Service Corps (WA)
$2.7 . . . . . . . . . . . Urban Schools Service Corps (NJ)
$2.24 . . . . . . . . . . . East Bay Conservation Corps (CA)
$1.98 . . . . . . . . . . . United Youth Corps of Maryland (MD)
$1.9 . . . . . . . . . . . New York State Corps Collaborative (NY)

WHO GOT THE LEAST? (in dollars)
$48,678 . . . . . . . . . . Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Mercer and Ocean Counties (NJ)

By Joshua Shenk

1994 FALL 11
Americorps participants pledged to "get things done" as volunteers in the Corporation's four national priority areas—education, public safety, human needs, and the environment. They will tutor and mentor low-income children, assist the elderly, renovate housing, work in Head Start centers, and educate communities about the environment through community-based projects nationwide.

Institute, which provides training and organizing skills, or the Hispanic Association for Corporate Responsibility, which demands more responsiveness from companies to the Hispanic community.

"We lose the diversity of experience," says Escobar. "We'd like to have a range of different modes of social change represented in our programs. But what we can still do is frame discussion in our trainings. There are other ways of doing things."

One of the largest new entrants to the service field, the Department of Agriculture, received a $2.6 million AmeriCorps grant plus the promise of $5.6 million in educational awards to 1,200 volunteers. Joel Berg, the department's service director, says the work will fall into three categories: environmental, anti-hunger, and, the largest portion, rural development. Berg acknowledges the steep hills ahead. "Obviously," he says, "we want to make sure there's no perception of make-work, no warmed-over internship, not even the vaguest appearance that we're using AmeriCorps members to fill jobs formerly filled by federal employees."

But a prominent service veteran who has worked with Berg cautions that with so many slots there is inevitably "a high degree of risk." Of the agriculture department's rural development work—including counseling on loans and grants, "incubating" businesses and luring the uninitiated onto the "Infobahn," and organizing recycling projects—the service official says, "It's not ill-defined; it's non-defined." With skepticism of federal programs at an all-time high, it's clear to AmeriCorps participants that they'll have to move mountains to make the program work. All it takes is one loafing corps member caught on the front page of a local paper to fix a negative image in the public imagination, says Berg, even if job descriptions are solid and slackers are few.

While the federal agencies worry about whether their projects are only "make...
work,” other national direct AmeriCorps grantees have been funded precisely to ensure that government policies are implemented. Starting in January, the Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP), with a $1 million grant, will send 75 corps members to train farm workers to avoid exposure to pesticides; the Environmental Protection Agency has issued strict rules on this matter, but allocates no money to enforce them. AFOP argues that it’s about time they start protecting farm workers, who are sent into the field immediately after pesticides are sprayed. Says one staffer, "We’re talking about ‘category one’ pesticides—where one teaspoon on skin is lethal." AFOP doesn’t share Eli Segal’s concern about expanding the federal government.

At the Corporation, Eli Segal and his deputies, many of them pragmatic twentysomethings, are eager to avoid another potential political quagmire—resisting prods from the left to adopt a Great Society approach, the mind-set that created Community Action Programs under Lyndon Johnson. Critics charge that the ubiquitous mantra—"getting things done"—is noble, but paradoxical for an agency that eschews programs that seek systemic change.

Empty the Shelters, a multi-site advocacy group for the homeless headquartered in San Francisco, will not be an AmeriCorps grantee. (Told of their slim chances, they didn’t apply.) With roots in leftist politics the group views the Corporation as looking to patch holes in communities that need an entirely new social infrastructure. “We don’t try and train people for a job that doesn’t exist,” says staff member Chris Daly. And with regard to the police, Daly calls cooperative ventures—such as those in the Corporation’s 1994 “Summer of Safety”—a folly when “young people are getting beat down in Oakland” by the very same police. “This is what it comes down to now,” he says. “The government is never going to fund me to work organizing homeless people to directly address their issues because the interests of poor folks in this country run contrary to the interests of the powerful.”

Within the service community, the vigorous debate does not concern ill-defined work or lazy volunteers, but rather the implications of the Corporation’s insistence that their money be used only toward “direct and demonstrable results” and not as seed money to organize politically, or to assault more intractable social ills. Inside the Corporation, no apologies are made for the “getting things done” approach, which bars advocacy and boosts direct service. But the real-life effects of this strategy are clear in one youth-led program denied a Summer of Safety grant from the Corporation: Project L.E.E.O. (Leadership, Education and Employment Opportunities) in Boston.

“We don’t fit the model,” says Brother Madeira, L.E.E.O.’s director, “If you look at what we’re doing, our projects are people, not visible projects. At the end of all this, how are you going to explain to Congress why you spent $2 billion? Well, you say we immunized X amount of children, painted X number of houses, cleaned up X acres of land. When you start talking about people and making a difference in their lives, how do you measure it? You can’t do it at the end of the year, because for some people the benefits come a few years later.”

L.E.E.O. does resemble the “multiplier model” of so many AmeriCorps programs, meaning the program targets at-risk youth with leadership potential, hoping to put them to work mentoring others. But its “at-risk” population—gang members—may be, for the Corporation, simply too risky. “Gang prevention” is a common AmeriCorps project; the Sonoma Project in Sonoma County, CA, for example, offers young people a safe environment and teaches them marketable skills. But what happens when you arrive too late for prevention? A felony conviction in the last seven years, says the program’s community relations coordinator Kathy Pierson, is an immediate disqualification.

The critics who assail the Corporation for avoiding risks are right in one respect. The Corporation gave itself that name—and Segal the title of C.E.O.—for a reason: It was designed to be part of the system, not a threat to it. Ultimately, though, the choice is not between the Corporation and more sweeping social change. In the conservative political culture of Washington, the program is as ambitious as could have been hoped for. “We have to be realistic about what we can accomplish and what we can’t,” says Michael Camuñez, a senior policy advisor at the Corporation. “It’s important to advocate for systemic change. But it’s also to important to remember that while we’re advocating for education reform, children are going untaught; while we’re advocating for safer streets, children are being shot. While we’re advocating for this or that, real needs are going unmet.”

While AmeriCorps insists upon running an apolitical program—and promises to come down hard on pro-

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Who can “get things done” Inside the Corporation . . .

The Senior Circle

Eli Segal—CEO and President of the Corporation for National Service
Shirley Sagawa—Managing Director and Executive Vice President
Catherine Milton—Director and Vice President for National Service Programs
Jim Scheibel—Vice President and Director for Domestic Service Programs (VISTA, ACTION)
Donald Scott—Vice President and Director, National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC)

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Eli Segal, Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation for National Service
Catherine Milton, Vice President for National Service Programs, offers this advice to organizations interested in applying for AmeriCorps funding next year:

1. Work with your state commission to understand its priorities when developing your proposal.
2. Get advice on your proposal from people who have run programs; show it to colleagues and friends.
3. Be sure that the community has really bought into your program—be able to demonstrate that your local partners are willing to contribute resources and funding.
4. Prepare a clear staffing plan. You now have the luxury of looking at programs that are funded; talk to the AmeriCorps members.
5. Follow the grant guidelines. If we ask for 20 pages, don’t give 40.

The Metropolitan Police Boys and Girls Club’s “Learn and Serve the District” program in Washington, DC, was one of 31 Summer of Safety programs, many of which received extension grants from the Corporation because fewer programs applied for “public safety” grants than expected.

grams that stray—the bottom-up approach has left some wiggle room. “The people in the service community who are screaming bloody murder about the limitations,” says Frank Slobig, co-founder of Youth Service America, “they oughta just do what they think is appropriate and let the chips fall where they may. I think the concern of the Corporation is a legitimate one, they don’t want to deal with the political dynamite in the ‘60s. They want to prevent people marching on City Hall; they want to prevent clearly identifiable visible political legislative lobbying.” If the Corporation didn’t expect some sort of advocacy, he says, they’d be “totally and completely naive. I think they’ve left enough room to drive a truck through and people ought to be concentrating on driving the truck.”

A Corporation staff member echoes this line. “It’s the old story about when you see a baby in the river you jump in and save it; and you see another baby and you save it too. Eventually, you want to go upstream and find out why. Some people think we’re uncomfortable with looking upriver. We’re not at all. We want people to think about the big picture; then they can act on it outside of their AmeriCorps experience.”

In dozens of interviews, service activists brushed off concerns that AmeriCorps’ presence could undermine more politically minded groups by dominating the field. If anything, they say, several hundred million dollars is being poured into the service community. Once it’s there, everyone benefits. Project L.E.E.O., for example, is integrally linked with major grant-winners such as City Year and Public Allies. And according to Joe Van Ness of the San Francisco Commission on National and Community Service, Empty the Shelters won’t receive AmeriCorps grant money, but may benefit from the work of AmeriCorps volunteers. The tightly woven nature of the service community, which the Corporation has enhanced by encouraging group projects, makes the trickle-down effect more likely. Indeed, Van Ness’s commission and Empty the Shelters work from the same building in San Francisco.

The debate between advocacy and direct service touches the essential questions of AmeriCorps’ future success or failure. Segal and his team are banking on creating a decentralized, bottom-up program by setting clear guidelines, finding good organizations, and essentially letting go, with the exception of several evaluations, until the next grant cycle. “It is the most difficult balance to face,” Berg says, “the balance between having a national identity, on one hand, and on the other assuring that we don’t crush existing initiatives, that we make this stuff work at the local level.” Local leaders require autonomy, but that can erode quality control. Bureaucracy must be minimized, but taxpayers should also see service as an example of the federal government doing good.

Authorized by Congress for funding through 1996, the Corporation’s results-minded mission clearly will be a tightrope walk. Alarming scenarios pile on top of each other like so many fallen acrobats.

But when asked about these dangers, Berg lets out a gentle laugh. “Sure, those are all possible,” he says. “And a plane can crash into the White House lawn.”

To contact the Corporation for National Service, call (202) 606-5000; nonprofits seeking grants, call AmeriCorps (202) 606-8070; to join AmeriCorps call (800) 94-ACORPS