

## 6.2 AMERICORPS SERVICE AND BENEFITS OVERVIEW



### Creation of AmeriCorps National Service

AmeriCorps and its programs are among the most recent chapters in our country's long history of encouraging and supporting civic engagement. AmeriCorps joins a long tradition of programs encouraging and rewarding service --- programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Montgomery GI. Bill and the Peace Corps.

AmeriCorps is a federal government community service program introduced by the Clinton Administration through the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 as a way to repay past loans or fund future study. President Bill Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act, which established the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and brought the full range of domestic community service programs under the umbrella of one central organization.

This legislation built on the first National Service Act signed by President George H.W. Bush in 1990. Later it was expanded by 50 percent under President George W. Bush. The newly created AmeriCorps incorporated two existing national service programs: the longstanding VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program, created by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 and the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC).

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act was signed by President Obama in 2009. This Act set an expanded target of increasing the number of AmeriCorps members to 250,000 by 2017 and made important changes to the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, including increasing the amount of the award by tying its value to the maximum Pell Grant, expanding its available uses, and authorizing transferability of the award for certain individuals 55+. The Serve America Act went into effect on October 1, 2009, and the final rules became effective on August 20, 2010.

### Corporation for National and Community Service

CNCS, an independent federal agency, was established in 1993 to engage Americans of all ages and backgrounds in community-based service with mission to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.

In addition to AmeriCorps, CNCS also administers Senior Corps and Learn and Serve America. Together these programs engage more than 2 million Americans of all ages and backgrounds in service each year and support a range of national and community service programs, providing opportunities for participants to serve full-time and part-time, with or without pay, as individuals or as part of a team.

- **AmeriCorps** engages thousands of Americans on a full or part-time basis to help communities address their toughest challenges while earning support for college, graduate school or job training.
- **Learn and Serve America** integrates service into the academic life of over 350,000 students in all fifty states.

- The *National Senior Service Corps* utilizes the skills, talents, and experiences of nearly 500,000 older Americans to help make communities stronger, safer, healthier and smarter.

In September 1994, the first class of AmeriCorps members—20,000 strong—began serving in more than 1,000 communities. On July 3, 2003, President Bush signed the Strengthen AmeriCorps Program Act, which nearly doubled the number of AmeriCorps members. By establishing new accounting guidelines for making Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards from the National Service Trust, the Corporation can now authorize approximately twice as many AmeriCorps positions in all categories. The legislation was the product of extensive, cooperative discussions with the Administration and a sign of the strong bipartisan support for AmeriCorps.

### **State Commissions/Councils**

The Act passed in 1003 that established the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) also required that all states have a State Commission for National and Community Service and partner to operate the commission with state funding to match the federally granted funds.

AmeriCorps State operates through the Service Commissions in each state. Each state's Service Commission administers and subgrants funding from the Corporation for National and Community Service to organizations in their states through annual grant competitions. State Commissions were established to administer service programs in the state and to promote citizenship and service throughout the state.

Thousands of organizations across the nation have been awarded AmeriCorps State and National grants since the program's inception. Local organizations and agencies apply through their state commission for AmeriCorps grants.

### **AmeriCorps**

AmeriCorps State and National is the largest of the AmeriCorps programs, and provides grants to state commissions, local and national organizations and agencies, including faith-based and community organizations, higher education institutions and public agencies. AmeriCorps National grants assist groups in recruiting, training and placing AmeriCorps members to meet critical community needs in education, health, the environment, veterans and economic opportunity.

AmeriCorps programs provide full and part-time opportunities for participants, called members, to provide service to their communities through community organizations and agencies. Unlike past federal initiatives, AmeriCorps is locally driven and community-based, but like them it has specific goals:

**Getting Things Done.** AmeriCorps will help a community meet its education, public safety, human or environmental challenges through direct and demonstrable services. Every operational AmeriCorps program becomes a powerful model for communities to apply their own efforts.

**Strengthening Communities.** While we rightly celebrate the ways we differ, we also need to remember the values we share. AmeriCorps unites individuals and institutions of all different kinds in a common effort to improve our communities.

**Encouraging Responsibility.** Through service and civic education, AmeriCorps operational programs enable members to see themselves as problem-solvers, not problems; to become leaders, not just followers; and to act on their responsibilities, as well as their rights.

**Expanding Opportunity.** AmeriCorps helps those who help America. Members receive job skills and invaluable experience, and education awards for schooling/job training or loan repayment.

**Building Capacity.** Through service to the community, members can help mobilize resources. AmeriCorps programs can take the lead in creating definite and specific strategies for communities to meet local needs.

AmeriCorps State and National members engage in direct service activities, such as after-school tutoring or homebuilding, and capacity-building activities and volunteer recruitment for the organizations they serve.

- After successfully completing their term of service, AmeriCorps State and National members may receive an Education Award of up to **\$5,550**.
- The Education Award can pay for additional college or graduate school courses, or it can pay off existing student loans.
- Full-time members typically complete 1,700 hours of service over 11 months' time.
- These members additionally receive a modest living allowance, health benefits, and child care assistance during their term.

AmeriCorps is an opportunity to make a big difference the lives of others. It's a chance to apply skills and ideals toward helping others and meeting critical needs in local communities. Each year, AmeriCorps offers more than 85,000 opportunities for adults of all ages and backgrounds to serve through a network of partnerships with local and national nonprofit groups. Whether service makes a community safer, cleans up after a disaster, gives a child a second chance, or helps protect the environment, members get things done through AmeriCorps.

AmeriCorps members may typically address critical needs in communities all across America such as:

- Mentor and/or tutor disadvantaged youth
- Fight illiteracy
- Improve health services
- Build affordable housing
- Teach computer skills
- Clean parks and streams
- Manage or operate after-school programs
- Help communities respond to disasters
- Build organizational capacity

## **Member Eligibility**

Eligibility requirements include the following:

- AmeriCorps membership is open to U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents age 17 and older.
- Members serve full or part time over a 10- to 12-month period.
- Upon successful completion of their service, members receive an AmeriCorps Education Award to pay for college or graduate school or to pay back qualified student loans.
- During their service, members receive health coverage, training, and student loan deferment.
- Full time members receive a modest annual living allowance.
- Members who serve part time receive a partial AmeriCorps Education Award.

## **Term Limits**

A member may serve up to four terms of service in AmeriCorps State and National regardless of the type of terms. However, a member may only receive the value of two full-time education awards.

Any term an individual has served in AmeriCorps State and National in the past will count towards the four-term limit.

### **Benefits of Service**

AmeriCorps members gain new skills and experiences—and find tremendous satisfaction from helping others. In addition, full-time members who complete their service earn a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award to pay for college, graduate school, or to pay back qualified student loans; members who serve part-time receive a partial Award. Some AmeriCorps members may also receive a modest living allowance during their term of service.

AmeriCorps members receive a wealth of benefits. Perhaps the biggest benefit is the satisfaction of incorporating service into your life and making a difference in your community and your country. Whether tutoring kids, building homes, clearing trails or helping to start a local health clinic the member will see the direct results from their work.

### **Professional Development**

AmeriCorps members gain valuable experience that translates directly into job experience in a chosen field. They learn teamwork, communication, responsibility, and other essential skills that will help them for the rest of their lives. Many find their AmeriCorps year provides them with more experiences and skills than they would have gotten in a traditional, paying job.

### **Segal Education Award**

Each AmeriCorps member who successfully completes a term of AmeriCorps service will receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. You can use your Segal AmeriCorps Education Award to pay educational expenses at qualified institutions of higher education, for educational training, or to repay qualified student loans. You have up to seven years after your term of service has ended to claim the award.

AmeriCorps Education Awards—recently renamed the Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards after Eli Segal, one of the pioneers of the national service movement and the first CEO of the Corporation—are a post-service benefit received by AmeriCorps members, including those supported through VISTA and the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC).

After successfully completing a term of service, AmeriCorps members who were signed up for an education award are eligible to receive a Segal Education Award. This education award can be used to pay education costs at qualified institutions of higher education, to pay for educational training, and to repay qualified student loans. A member can make payments from their award in full or in part, and take up to seven years after a successfully completed term of service to use the award.

The amount of the Segal Education Award is tied to the maximum amount of the U.S. Department of Education's Pell Grant. Since the maximum amount of Pell grants can change from year to year, so can the dollar amounts of education awards. (For terms of service that were approved using 2011 funds, the amount of a full-time education award was \$5,550; awards for part-time terms of service are pro-rated based on the amount of a full-time award.) To confirm the award amount for which you are eligible, call your program or project sponsor.

### **Amount of the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award**

Beginning with terms of service that were supported with 2010 funds, the amount of a full-time education award is equivalent to the maximum value of the Pell Grant for the award year in which the term of

service is funded. Prior to this time, the amount of an education award had remained the same since the AmeriCorps program began in 1993. As a reference, the amount of a Pell grant for the 2011 fiscal year is \$5,550.

Because the maximum amount of the Pell Grant can change every year, the amount of a full-time award can change in the future. However, once a member earns an award, the dollar value of that award will not increase.

- For all programs, award amounts for part-time terms of service vary based upon the length of the required term of service.
- Payments made from Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards are considered taxable income in the year that the Corporation makes the payment to the school or loan holder.
- A member serving in a full-time term of service is required to complete the service within 12 months.

A member is eligible for a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award if they successfully complete their term of service in accordance with their signed member contract.

### **Alternative to the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award**

As an alternative to the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, AmeriCorps\*VISTA members may choose to take a post-service cash stipend. Only AmeriCorps\*VISTA alumni who choose the stipend and have student loans may be eligible for up to 15% cancellation on certain types of loans.

### **Segal Education Award Limitations**

Currently, the maximum numbers of terms that you can serve in each AmeriCorps program are:

- four for AmeriCorps State and National
- three for VISTAs
- two for NCCC

Full-time, half-time, reduced half-time, quarter time, and minimum time terms of service each count as one term of service. Generally, if a member is released for cause before completing their term of service and do not receive an education award, that term of service counts as one term.

The Trust does not make payments to anyone other than qualified schools and loan holders. Members should see a financial aid counselor for information on how they handle disbursements and reimbursements.

If a member withdraws from the school at which they used the education award, the school may be required to refund the Trust. If any refund is owed, it is credited to the members' education award "account," and is subject to the award's original expiration date (seven years from the date the award was earned).

Under certain circumstances, a member may use the education award to study outside the U.S.

An AmeriCorps member has seven years to use the education award from the date of successful completion of service. The award can be divided and portions used at different times, as long as it is for authorized expenditures within the specified time period. For example, a portion of the award can be applied to existing qualified student loans, and the remainder saved to pay for authorized college costs a few years down the road.

## **Segal Education Award Transfers**

The Serve America Act allows for the transfer of AmeriCorps State and National, and Silver Service education awards under certain conditions. Basically, the person who earned the award has to have been at least 55 years old when they began the term of service and the person to whom the award is transferred has to be the transferring individual's child, grandchild, or foster child.

To transfer an award, an individual must:

- have earned an education award in an AmeriCorps State and National, or a Silver Scholar term of service;
- have been at least 55 years of age before beginning the term of service for which the award is attached;
- have begun this term of service on or after October 1, 2009;
- transfer the award before the original expiration date;
- designate all or a portion of the unused award for the transfer; and
- complete the online forms authorizing the transfer, which includes providing information and certifying eligibility to make the transfer.

