

NEWS AND ANALYSIS

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Trump Budget Proposal Raises Worries: Could AmeriCorps Disappear?

By Eden Stiffman



DAVE GRAUEL

Cady Zuvich (left) checks in as Eean Thomas (right), like her a member of the AmeriCorps team at the Baltimore chapter of literacy nonprofit Reading Partners, conducts a tutoring session.

City Year's annual summit in Washington is typically a celebration of the education nonprofit's achievements, as well as a strategy session on what comes next. This year's gathering took on a darker tone as the nonprofit faced an alarming question: Could AmeriCorps, the federal program that has for more than two decades helped supply vital manpower to charities like City Year, simply go away?

"The loss of our AmeriCorps funding would be devastating," says Ryann Denham, executive director of City Year Baton Rouge, which has 93 corps members working in the Louisiana city's public and charter schools — about 80 percent of the chapter's staff. "Without funding we would have to cut the number of young people who serve with us, thus reducing the number of schools we partner with and students that we serve."

President Trump's preliminary budget plan calls for eliminating the Corporation for National and Community Service, a \$1 billion-a-year agency that oversees AmeriCorps and other federal service programs.

City Year, which helps support students in high-poverty schools, receives more than \$35 million a year in AmeriCorps funding for its 3,000 corps members in 28 cities, amounting to about 25 percent of its overall budget.

Mr. Trump's budget proposal sent tremors of uncertainty through the nonprofit and the thousands of other charities, public agencies, schools, and community and faith-based groups across the country that rely on the support of the 80,000 working AmeriCorps members.

An Advocacy Push

Since the first AmeriCorps class set out in 1994, more than 1 million members have contributed more than 1.4 billion hours in service across the country, according to a Corporation for National and Community Service fact sheet. They have also mobilized more than 2.3 million volunteers for the organizations they serve. Corps members receive a small stipend and scholarship, plus health insurance and other workplace benefits — mostly through grants administered by states — for what is generally 10 or 12 months of service.

Despite the broad reach and past backing from both Democratic and Republican administrations, national service suffers politically from people not really understanding how the system works, says AnnMaura Connolly, president of Voices for National Service, a coalition of service organizations.

"A lot of folks think it's a big government bureaucracy and not actually this incredibly flexible platform that invests in nonprofits and faith-based organizations and can be used to address emerging critical needs," says Ms. Connolly, who also serves as City Year's chief strategy officer.

With the budget threat, the coalition's member groups are doubling down on advocacy and education efforts, meeting with editorial boards and reaching out to members of Congress to make the case that the relatively modest investment — spending on AmeriCorps's parent agency amounts to .03 percent of the federal budget — is money well spent.

Ms. Connolly and other advocates say they're cautiously optimistic that Congress will pass a budget that continues to support the corps and other service programs.

The Personal Touch

Some organizations that utilize AmeriCorps workers are starting to do contingency planning with their boards and staffs.

"We don't think we could do an adequate job next year without having that staffing on site," says Kevin Campbell, president of Habitat for Humanity of Wake County in North Carolina, which has had the support of AmeriCorps members since 2000.

In a county where 28,000 families lack adequate or affordable housing, "we're trying to not build fewer houses," Mr. Campbell says. This year, Wake County Habitat is building 60 homes, and it aims to built 70 next year with the help of a few additional corps members.

Of the seven corps members the chapter has this year, six are paired with a full-time construction supervisor, coordinating 20 to 25 volunteers per day on each house. That frontline role is critical to volunteers having a positive experience and later returning, Mr. Campbell says.

"It's not just a corps member spending a year out sawing boards and hammering nails," he says. "It's about leverage" that broadens the organization's capacity.

In addition to helping out at construction sites, some corps members focus on family services and mortgage compliance, providing Habitat clients with a personal touch they may not receive if AmeriCorps is cut.

Habitat for Humanity has 533 corps members serving in similar roles nationwide, according to the housing charity's national office. Affiliates that use the AmeriCorps program serve nine times as many families and engage 70 percent more volunteers than those who don't, Habitat says.

Losing that help, alongside other proposed cuts to federal housing and community-development programs, could severely impact the charity's ability to serve more families, Mr. Campbell says. "If we're going to pull back federal resources, where are those resources going to come from?"



ELLIOT HANEY/CITY YEAR

Ari Holsten (right), an AmeriCorps member working with education charity City Year, counsels a middle-school student in Baton Rouge, La.



Loss of Impact

Reading Partners, a national nonprofit that mobilizes community volunteers to provide one-on-one reading support to students in underresourced public elementary schools, receives \$5.4 million a year in AmeriCorps funding, about 15 percent of its total revenue. The more than 350 AmeriCorps members serving in 14 metropolitan areas make up about 65 percent of the nonprofit's paid work force — a big reason why the Reading Partners is so efficient, its leaders say.

"AmeriCorps is the lifeblood of our work," says Daniel Ruppert, the organization's program director in Baltimore. "If you want to know about what's happening at a school or with a student, you talk to the AmeriCorps member because they're closest to the work."

The Baltimore affiliate, where 40 corps members supplement a regular staff of 10, could be looking at serving a reduced number of schools and fewer kids in the schools where it remains.

"It's not that we wouldn't be able to continue" without AmeriCorps volunteers, says Mr. Ruppert. "It's that we wouldn't be able to make as much of an impact without them."

If his chapter loses the \$500,000 it gets from Maryland's Office of Government and Volunteerism to hire AmeriCorps members, it would also lose leverage to raise more dollars from individual and foundations.

According to a 2013 study by a Columbia University researcher, for every \$10 in federal money appropriated for AmeriCorps, another \$15 is separately raised from private sources to fund the service's partnerships across the country.



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"It looks like a small line item, but it creates so much opportunity for communities and for folks that are looking to do service that might not otherwise have been able to do that," says Mr. Ruppert.

Even organizations that can afford to hire additional staff to replace AmeriCorps troops would lose something in the bargain, he says. "It's different experience when you have an AmeriCorps member who knows that they're dedicating their year to service. They bring an energy and excitement that is so incredible to watch year after year."

A Pipeline for Talent

An additional worry for nonprofit leaders is the extent to which service members become future leaders — and how that pipeline might be hampered by cuts.

"It's a training ground for the public sector," says Adolfo Rivera, director of national-service programs at Bay Area Community Resources, which serves as an intermediary between nonprofits in seven California counties and more than 200 corps members working at them. At his own organization, 70 percent of the staff are former corps members.

That's the case at many charities with AmeriCorps volunteers. Often they'll join the staffs of the organizations they serve, or go on to support similar types of organizations. For instance, the Armstrong Conservation District in rural Pennsylvania has worked with nearly 50 corps members over last 20 years. Of its full-time employees, whose work may include water-quality monitoring or environmental-education programs, two served in AmeriCorps.

For nonprofit employers, AmeriCorps is "a nice way to bring younger people in," says Mr. Campbell, of Habitat for Humanity. "They're great to hire because they know who we are, they have experience, we've gotten to see their work ethic and skills."

Long Tradition

City Year's Washington summit last month ended with a speech from Bill Clinton, whose administration created AmeriCorps. The former president highlighted the tradition of bipartisan support for national service.

When President George H.W. Bush left the White House, he left his successor a note urging him to continue supporting his "Points of Light" volunteerism initiative. In 1993, Mr. Clinton signed a law that, among other things, created the Corporation for National and Community Service as an independent government agency. When he left office, he passed the torch to President George W. Bush, who increased AmeriCorps funding by hundreds of millions of dollars.

But due to budget shortfalls and partisan politics, the growth of AmeriCorps and other national-service programs has been stymied in recent years.

Critics have argued that government should not be involved in volunteerism and that volunteers should not be paid.

Still, voters across the political spectrum strongly support investing tax dollars in national-service programs, according to a poll by TargetPoint Consulting. Eighty-three percent of voters said they would like to see federal investment in national service maintained or increased.

"This isn't our first rodeo, facing elimination," says Mr. Rivera, of Bay Area Community Resources.

But with the unpredictability of the new administration, he adds, things are more tenuous: "We're in uncharted territory."

Mr. Trump has said little about volunteering, civic engagement, or national service, breaking with decades of presidential tradition on the subject.

Ms. Connolly believes it's still early to write off White House support for service programs. "We need to give them a chance," she said, noting that President Obama did not name a chief executive for the Corporation for National and Community Service until April 2009, three months into his first term.

"I think we have to allow for some education and allow for folks in the administration to get their heads around how this could be a valuable and powerful way for them to address the issues they care about," she says, citing Mr. Trump's stated concerns about rural economies, inner-city crime and schools, and veterans and military families. "Particularly as we're looking at an era of shrinking budgets, this is a really cost-effective way to look at addressing some of these issues."

Send an e-mail to Eden Stiffman.

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