MODULE TWO

In the content session, members discuss and decide on the most vital problems facing America. In the action session, members identify community problems.

CONTENT SESSION: CITIZEN CHOICES

One of the crucial tasks of a citizen is becoming knowledgeable and thinking critically about community problems. This session asks members to select a problem (related to an AmeriCorps issue area) and convince others of its importance. First, members read a brief essay on why thinking critically about problems is important. Then they select a problem that they consider America's most important problem, form groups based on their selection, and make arguments to convince others of its importance.

Facilitator Checklist

- Chalkboard or chart paper
- Pens and paper for members
- Copies of Handout 2A for members
- Write the nine items listed under "America's Deadlines" on Handout 2A on the chalkboard or chart paper.

Learning Objectives

Members will be able to:

1. Discuss and form an opinion on what is the most pressing problem facing America.
2. Develop arguments supporting why it is the most pressing problem.
3. Make a persuasive presentation.

Notes

HANDOUT 2A

Citizen Choices

Introduction

Every day we are confronted with serious social problems that affect the quality of life for ourselves and our community. As an AmeriCorps member, you have made an exciting choice to work on problems regarding education, public safety, the environment, and other human needs. Where do you begin? Where will you be most effective? What problems do you think are most pressing?

I. Selecting Problems

While government, business, and non-profit groups all play a role in addressing America's problems, they don't have enough resources to deal with every problem. Even with the help of volunteers, not all problems can be fully addressed. Hard choices must be made.

For government at the local, state, and federal level, legislators must decide every year which programs will be funded and which will not. As individuals and volunteers, we must decide what causes to support and where to put our time and energy. Once we have decided, we also have to try to persuade others—our governmental representatives, community groups, and friends and associates—that the cause we believe in is worth supporting.

Choosing issues and convincing others of their importance is an essential civic responsibility.

II. Activity

Carefully review the following list of some of the problems that currently face America. Which has the most pressing deadline? Which, if solved, will benefit the greatest number of people? Decide for yourself which problem is the most important.

America's Deadlines

1. AIDS
2. Illiteracy
3. Child abuse
4. Air, land, and water pollution
5. Gang-related violence
6. High drop-out rates from school
7. Forest, wetlands, and wildlife preservation
8. Drug and alcohol abuse
9. Other (please specify)

In the second part of the activity, form groups with members who have made the same choice of most important problem. Discuss your reasons and prepare a presentation to persuade others that yours is the most pressing deadline.

III. For Discussion

1 How does each of these problems relate to the AmeriCorps issue areas?
2. What additional problems might be added to the list?
3. What could you and your group do to address some of these problems?

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Conducting the Session

1. Distribute Handout 2A. Have members read Introduction and Section I: Selecting Problems. When they finish, briefly answer any questions they may have.

2. Ask members to read Section II: Activity. When they finish, ask members if any additional items should be added to the list of America's Deadlines (add the additional items under "other" on the board). Then tell members to take a moment and decide which problem is most important. (Members should think and decide individually without discussion.)

3. Point to item number 1 and ask: "Who has selected this item as the most pressing problem?" As members raise their hands, direct them to meet together in an area of the room. If no one selects the item, move to the next item.

4. Continue this process for the remaining items, after which you should have several groups of different sizes around the room. Ask each group to prepare a brief argument in favor of its selection. After a few minutes, call on the groups to make their presentations.

5. After each presentation, ask if anyone has changed his or her mind and would like to switch groups. Discuss the reasons.

6. Conclude by holding a discussion using the questions in Section III: For Discussion.

ACTION SESSION: IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

In this session, members start preparing for an action project by taking a look at community problems they might want to work on. First, members read AmeriCorps guidelines on projects. Next, they read about some AmeriCorps projects and discuss different community problems. Then they interview community members about what they believe are the most important community problems.

Learning Objectives

Members will be able to:

1. Generate their own ideas on the most significant problems in the community.
2. Gather ideas from community members on the most important problems.

Facilitator Checklist

- Chalkboard or chart paper
- Pens and paper for members
- Copies of Handout 2B and 2C for members
- Members bring their completed 3 x 5 cards.

Notes

HANDOUT 2B

Identifying Community Problems

Introduction

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead, anthropologist (1901–1978)

Being an effective citizen means taking an active role in your community. By joining AmeriCorps, you've made a commitment to be an active citizen. What do you want to do to help the community?

I. Getting Things Done

AmeriCorps is about getting things done. AmeriCorps members have helped communities strengthen their schools, make their streets safer, improve their public health care, and clean their environment. For example, AmeriCorps members in different communities have:

- Improved the reading scores of elementary students through tutoring and helping parents get more involved in school activities.
- Helped lower crime rates by working with community policing efforts and Neighborhood Watch organizations.
- Helped public health officials immunize thousands of infants.
- Enhanced the environment by clearing trash from lots, developing community gardens, and planting trees.

These are just a few examples. There are many possible things you can do as an AmeriCorps member. AmeriCorps places just a few limits on projects. These restrictions are:

- Your project should help a community meet its educational, public safety, environmental, or other human needs (such as housing and health care). These are the areas that AmeriCorps focuses on.
- Your project should have community support. The goal of AmeriCorps is to help communities achieve what they want. Before you do any project, you should check with community organizations and community members by interviewing or polling them. They can guide you in planning and carrying out your project to ensure it meets community needs.
- Your project must not involve any "prohibited program activities." Since AmeriCorps is a nonpartisan organization set up by Congress, members must be careful not to involve AmeriCorps in political, religious, or union activities. **Handout 2C** lists activities prohibited for AmeriCorps members.

II. For Discussion

1. What do you think are this community's greatest problems? Make a list.
2. Why do you think it's important to get input from the community on its problems?
3. What community members or organizations can give you input on the community's problems?

III. Activity

Before the next session, call or meet with at least two community members or representatives from community agencies and ask them to list the five greatest community problems. Bring your list to the next session.

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Handout 2C

Conducting the Session

1. From an assignment in the last action session, groups were supposed to collect information and record it on 3 x 5 cards. Ask each group to present the agencies they found out about. Collect the cards they filled out. Hold a discussion using these questions:
   - What was your best resource for finding things?
   - What are non-profit organizations? How are they different from government agencies?
   - Which organizations seemed most important in working on AmeriCorps issue areas? Why?
   - What relationships do you see between these various agencies?
   - How can you use the information you found?

2. Distribute **Handout 2B**. Ask members to read the **Introduction**. Hold a brief discussion by asking:
   - What does Margaret Mead's statement mean?
   - Do you think it is true? Why or why not?

3. Tell members they are going to discuss ways to make a difference in their own community. Ask members to read **Section I: Getting Things Done**.

4. Distribute **Handout 2C** (this is the list of Prohibited Program Activities). Briefly discuss it. (NOTE: All projects described in this publication meet AmeriCorps guidelines. Even so, before any member takes part in a project, you should make sure the project does not involve any of the activities listed in the "Prohibited Program Activities." If you are unsure whether a particular project is

prohibited, postpone the project until you receive clearance from your supervisor.)

5. Hold a discussion using the questions in Section II: For Discussion. List on the board all the problems members come up with. Have members copy this list for the next action session.

6. Assign Section III: Activity. Remind members that they can use the contacts they found out about in the last action session to help them complete the assignment. Tell members to bring the lists of community problems that they gather to the next session when they will share the lists.

Optional Follow-up Activities

- Use the 3 x 5 cards to create a Community Resource File Box or Computer Database.
- Ask members to create a chart showing the relationships among the various agencies.

Notes

HANDOUT 2A

Citizen Choices

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9. Other (please specify)

In the second part of the activity, form groups with members who have made the same choice of most important problem. Discuss your reasons and prepare a presentation to persuade others that yours is the most pressing deadline.

III. For Discussion

1 How does each of these problems relate to the AmeriCorps issue areas?
2. What additional problems might be added to the list?
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HANDOUT 2B

Identifying Community Problems

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II. For Discussion

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III. Activity

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HANDOUT 2C

Prohibited Program Activities for AmeriCorps Members and Staff

While charging time to the AmeriCorps Program, accumulating service/training hours or otherwise engaged in activities associated with the AmeriCorps program or the Corporation, staff and members may not engage in the following activities:

a. Any effort to influence legislation.

b. Organizing or engaging in protests, petitions, boycotts or strikes.

c. Assisting, promoting or deterring union organizing.

d. Impairing existing contracts for services or collective bargaining agreements.

e. Engaging in partisan political activities or other activities designed to influence the outcome of an election to any public office.

f. Participating in, or endorsing, events or activities which are likely to include advocacy for or against political parties, political platforms, political candidates, proposed legislation, or elected officials.

g. Engaging in religious instruction; conducting worship services; or engaging in any form of religious proselytization.

h. Providing a direct benefit to:

   i. a for-profit entity;

   ii. a labor union;

   iii. a partisan political organization; or

   iv. an organization engaged in the religious activities described in g., unless Grant funds are not used to support the religious activities.

   v. a nonprofit entity that fails to comply with the restrictions contained in section 501(c)(3) of Title 26, except that nothing in this section shall be construed to prevent Members or Participants from engaging in advocacy activities undertaken at their own initiative.