

Preparing the Ground

The decision to consider starting an AmeriCorps program is a huge one. Becoming part of the National Service movement brings opportunities for both your organization and the community you serve. It also brings significant additional work for your organization. We have provided a list of documents that your organization must be familiar with as it considers applying for an AmeriCorps grant.

The **Preparing the Ground** section begins to identify the various activities you will need to complete prior to submitting the AmeriCorps Grant Application. This section can give you a sense as to whether your organization is ready and willing to proceed in completing the application. We have provided two tools to get you started. The first is an assessment tool [Organization Assessment Checklist](#). Use this tool to get an initial snapshot of your organization's strengths and areas of growth. The second tool—[Things To Do Checklist](#)--identifies some preparatory activities necessary to submit the AmeriCorps grant.

Caution: Applying for this federal grant is quite comprehensive. Although there is some technical assistance available, we suggest you thoroughly review and understand the requirements of the AmeriCorps Grant Application. While your organization may have had federal awards in the past, AmeriCorps has some specific infrastructure requirements that many federal grants may not require.

At the end of this section, you will be able to

- Establish and maintain an active Community Advisory Group.
- Develop and conduct a community needs assessment.
- Create and implement the AmeriCorps program work plan.
- Write and submit the AmeriCorps program grant proposal using eGrants.
- Access and use a variety of tools and electronic resources to complete all activities in the Tools for Success section.

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Community Advisory Group

What is a Community Advisory Group?

The Community Advisory Group (CAG) advises and informs your efforts to serve the community. It is composed of community members familiar with the community's needs and the people who live there. Additionally, it may include members knowledgeable about your organization's mission, policy and procedures, national service and AmeriCorps.

Why should you develop a Community Advisory Group?

Advisory Group members can be the power behind your program's agenda, help to identify potential service site partners, enhance your organization's community visibility, identify community needs, and assist in resource generation.

How do you do it?

✓	Identify desirable community members you would like as a part of the advisory group.
✓	Invite prospective Advisory Group members to your organization for a service experience, roundtable discussion, and to meet community members who might receive services.
✓	Educate Advisory Group members about your program and its objectives, mission and vision, and national service and AmeriCorps.
✓	Recruit prospective Advisory Group members, who will support and advance your organization's mission.
✓	Formalize the Advisory Group structure; establish the goals, agenda, and meeting schedule.
✓	Involve CAG members in on-going evaluation of program components, organizational sustainability, and community impact.
✓	Listen! Find out who the respected members of the community are and what they are interested in.
✓	Communicate! Take the opportunity to begin building a strong, trustful relationship with potential advisory group members.
✓	Cultivate relationships with these community members.
✓	Collaboratively establish the expectations of the Group.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who do we invite to join the Advisory Group? *Cultivate relationships with respected members of the community that are committed to its improvement; people who are willing to work collaboratively to move things forward. Select your partners carefully. Be sure that prospective Advisory Group members support and buy-in to your mission, that they are actively committed and have the time to carry out their responsibilities with the Group.*

How do we engage and use the Advisory Group? *You can involve Advisors in leveraging influence, getting new resources, serving as community ambassadors, and standing up on behalf of your organization. There are many other possibilities for involving community advisors in your AmeriCorps program.*

Do we have to establish an Advisory Group? *No. We offer it as an example of bringing stakeholders together.*

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Community Needs Assessment

What is a community needs assessment?

A community needs assessment is a mechanism created to allow a community to decide its needs and who can best address those needs.

Why should I conduct a community needs assessment?

An assessment helps you to build a solid, trusting relationship with the community. First, community members must be collaboratively involved in determining what happens in their community. This can significantly increase buy-in, participation, and cooperativeness. Second, your organization can determine whether a particular community is a good fit for the services the organization has to offer. Third, the needs assessment helps you be more strategic in using scarce resources to address the identified needs.

How do you do it?

✓	Determine and develop data collection tools to be used.
✓	Assign a staff member(s) to collect the assessment data.
✓	Ask the right questions (use mostly open-ended questions that begin with “what” and “how”).
✓	Involve the members of your Community Advisory Group and community partners or stakeholders in gathering data for the community needs assessment.
✓	Review the data collected with the Community Advisory Group and other stakeholders.
✓	Determine whether your organization’s proposed services meet the community’s articulated needs. Or, develop proposed program services to address the identified community needs.
✓	Use the data collected to inform the writing of your program measurements, the selection of community partners, member recruitment activities, and other aspects of your program.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are some ways we can collect information? *There are many ways to find out what the community perceives as its needs. You can hold focus groups, implement a written survey, go door-to-door and talk with community members, or interview people currently receiving services. Be sure to get a good cross section of community members. This will help you really determine what the community identifies as its priorities.*

What do we do with the information once we collect it? *A first step might be to hold a community meeting and share your findings with the community. By further engaging community members, they will continue to feel invested in the process of developing a program that meets their needs. Once you and the community have reviewed the data, use it to clarify your program objectives, select your service site partners, and inform your staffing decisions. These are just a few ideas. Think creatively!*

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Resources

<i>Resource</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Contact</i>
National Service Resource Center	A training and technical assistance provider to CNCS funded programs.	http://www.nationalservice.org/resources/nsrc/forms/survey.html XVI.B.1.PDF -> Community/Agency Contact Form

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Creating the AmeriCorps Program Work Plan

What is a work plan?

A program work plan is a tool that helps you and the community advisory committee set up and prioritize a “to do” list that will guide the organization from the initial concept through the first six to nine months of the start-up phase. The objective of this list is to plan, schedule, and control project activities to meet your program objectives.

Why should you complete a work plan?

The work plan is an essential process to accomplish two broad goals. First, the work plan helps your organization to plan and submit the AmeriCorps Grant Application. Second, the work plan is used to organize the development and implementation of your program. For both the preparation and development of the grant application and the implementation of the program, the work plan enables the organization to define:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific tasks need to be accomplished? • Who will accomplish each task? • How will each specific task be done? • When must the task be accomplished? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much will it cost to accomplish each task? • What resources do you need to achieve each specific task? • How will you know when you completed the task? What is the deliverable?
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Be S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-limited) When planning each task remember to apply the **S.M.A.R.T.** principle.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the task Specific? • Is the task Measurable? How will you measure the task? • Is the task Attainable? Can the task be completed within the next 6 months to 1 year? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the task Realistic? Do you have the resources to accomplish this task? Are you missing some important steps prior to tackling this task? • Have you specified specific Time-limitations for each task?
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Sample Work Plan Template

Task	Assigned to	Due Date	Resources Required - people, time, money	Deliverable/End Product
Identify Advisory Members	Jill	5/1/2004	Meet with community Leaders and various stakeholders	6 advisory members Identified
Draft Vision & Mission Statement	Janet	6/1/2004	Facilitate a 1-day Meeting with advisory members	Final draft of vision

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Different Phases of a Work plan

The following phases are the minimum tasks for creating a work plan for your program. The phase where you begin depends upon whether you are a new or existing organization. This is not an exhaustive list, but is included as a point of reference. Think through the various phases you might encounter while organizing to submit the grant application and the similar or different phases you might encounter developing and implementing the program.

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft a one-page need statement stating why your program is needed in the community. • Meet with community organizations, religious institutions, stakeholders and residents to determine the feasibility and support for your idea. Get their support in writing, if possible. • Recruit a Community Advisory Group to help with Phases 2 and 3. • Advisory group creates an agreement stating its function as a team and their support for the initiative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft vision and mission statement. • Draft a statement of need that includes quantitative and qualitative reasons why this program is important. <i>For example, there are seven large abandoned and vacant lots that are used as trash dumpsites and are a place where drugs are sold and used; therefore, by cleaning and maintaining these lots we plan to reduce the number of drug sales and use within this community.</i> • Advisory group identifies all resources necessary for running the program. This includes building space, transportation, volunteers, technology, training and other relevant resources. • Advisory group creates a budget that adequately reflects the objectives of this program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify potential Service/Host Sites where your AmeriCorps members could perform service. • Identify potential donors both financial and in-kind that may support your program. • Identify how and where AmeriCorps members will be recruited. • Create strong first year program objectives.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who should we talk to as we begin this process? *Begin preliminary discussions with your State Commission or with the Corporation for National and Community Service to understand the process.. Learn how they function, what they do, what they have to offer your program, and identify their community improvement focus areas. Ask questions.*

What if other organizations have done or are doing the same type of service program we want to do? *Take the time to find out about their successes and challenges. Learn their best practices. If this is a local AmeriCorps program, see if there might be a duplication of services for the community you anticipate serving.*

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Writing the AmeriCorps Program Grant Proposal

What is a grant proposal?

A grant proposal is the document you write and submit to the granting authority in response to the Request for Proposals (RFP) issued. This is the statement of your organization that describes your intended community service efforts and hoped-for resulting accomplishments.

Why do I need to write a grant proposal?

The grant proposal is the formal step to compete for AmeriCorps program funding. The success of your community service idea can be dependent on funding and effective management of the grant. The grant proposal informs the grant maker of your intentions and strategies to reach your desired goals. Additionally, it is important that the senior management of your organization are appropriately involved and have approved the application for the AmeriCorps grant.

How do I do it?

Obtain the Request for Proposal (RFP) from the grant maker, typically your state commission or from the Corporation for National and Community Service. This RFP document will provide the information necessary to submit a grant proposal.

✓	Read the RFP cover-to-cover to understand the big picture of what is required to submit a successful grant proposal. The RFP can be a helpful document filled with checklists and worksheets that provide guidance on developing budgets and program performance measurements.
✓	Bring all stakeholders together to participate in responding to specific requirements of the proposal. For example, collecting letters of support, identifying matching funds, etc.
✓	Ensure the program design process has answered any questions or requirements raised in the RFP.
✓	Write a narrative describing your community service idea that matches the Corporation needs. You may also include executive summary, intermediate and long-term outcomes, certification documents, and copies of your organization's recent fiscal audits.
✓	Follow the submission requirements of the RFP explicitly. Pay close attention to details about total pages and length of the document, margins, format, deadlines and delivery modes (electronic or paper, US Mail, hand delivery, number of copies, etc.).
✓	Take advantage of technical assistance offered by the state commission, the Corporation for National and Community Service, or grant makers and funders. Informational meetings or telephone conference calls are frequently beneficial to newcomers trying to grasp the nuances of writing and submitting a grant proposal.

What are some other names for RFP? *The RFP is a commonly used term. Other terms describing the application process are Notice of Funding Opportunity and Notice of Funds Availability.*

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eGrants: Submitting the AmeriCorps Application

What is eGrants?

eGrants is an integrated, secure, web-based system developed by the Corporation to automate the entire grants management process. It allows applicants to find grant opportunities, apply for grants, and manage their grant reporting over the Internet. The system also allows the Corporation to review applications, award grants and manage those grants electronically.

Why do you need to use eGrants?

eGrants is your key to the Corporation. AmeriCorps*State/National program applications are reviewed and managed via the eGrants system. Applicants use eGrants to apply for AmeriCorps program funds and track the progress of their proposals through the review process. The system is also used by Corporation grantees and sub-grantees over the life of their grant to request grant amendments, apply for continuation funds, and update contact information among other uses.

How do you use the eGrants system?

Access the eGrant system from the Corporation's website, www.nationalservice.org. The website contains information on readying your computer to access eGrants, setting up a user account, as well as a user manual. Upon creating your account and establishing a username and password, you will be able to log on to the system and access its application and administrative functions. Each person in your organization who will be using eGrants will need an individual eGrants account.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I have to use eGrants to submit an AmeriCorps*State/National grant application to the Corporation? *You are strongly encouraged to submit your application via eGrants, but it is not required. Refer to the AmeriCorps Guidelines and the application instructions for more information. Please note that the Corporation enters into eGrants any paper applications that it receives. Even if an application is received on paper, if funded, the grant will be administered via eGrants.*

What if I cannot access or connect to eGrants? *The eGrants manual on the website contains a chapter on accessing eGrants. It also contains contact information for the eGrants Help Desk.*

How do I start a new eGrants application? *Access eGrants from the Corporation's website, www.nationalservice.org/resources.*

What if I experience last-minute technical difficulty and am not able to submit my eGrants application by the deadline? *Refer to the application instructions to learn what to do in the event of last minute submission difficulties. You are strongly encouraged to input your application into eGrants ahead of the deadline. It is also a good idea to compose and save the narrative portion of your application using word processing software and then copy it into eGrants. This will lessen the possibility of losing information in the event of an interruption in your Internet connection or other technical problems.*

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Resources

<i>Resource</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Contact</i>
eGrants Online User Manual	This manual will familiarize you with the eGrants system and how it works. You can read it online, print it a chapter at a time, or print the entire manual.	http://www.cns.gov/egrants/manual/aboutegrants.html
Frequently Asked Questions	More of the most frequently asked questions from eGrants applicants and answers.	http://www.cns.gov/egrants/pdf/faq.pdf
Computer Check	Perform a check on your computer and Internet browser to verify that you have all the components you need to use eGrants.	http://www.cns.gov/egrants/computer.html
eGrants Practice System	The practice eGrants system mimics the live one. You can log in to practice setting up an account and entering an application. Practicing will greatly reduce the amount of time it will take you to enter your actual application.	http://www.cns.gov/egrants/practice.html
Help	When you are logged into <i>eGrants</i> , you may click on the "Help" menu for access to additional technical support and guidance.	? icon found on the tool bar when in eGrants.
Help Desk	Staff of operators available to provide technical assistance to eGrants users.	1-888-677-7849 or egrantshelp@cns.gov

TOOLS
for
SUCCESS



Things To Do Checklist

INITIAL PROCESS	
	Recruit, invite, and train a Community Advisory Group.
	Implement a Community Needs Assessment.
	Select community members to discuss the program idea.
	<p>The potential AmeriCorps program creates the work plan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect letters of support. • Identify resources in the community. • Create a supporter and stakeholder list • Identify potential in-kind and cash donors. • Determine the number of AmeriCorps members needed. • Identify service/host sites if AmeriCorps members will be at sites other than your organization. • Outline a tentative program budget. • Other issues
	If you are an existing organization you will need to conduct a preliminary review to identify and/or strengthen current financial systems and controls. If you are a new organization, you will need to develop a plan and begin to establish your financial management system.
	<p>Service/Host Sites are engaged in an ongoing dialogue.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service/Host organization conducts an internal audit to determine their capabilities and resources. Outcomes, issues, and remedies are discussed. • Service/Host sites determined based on available resources, funds, and supervision of members as well as meaningful, quality service projects.
	Write Scope of Work draft with Service/Host Site.
	The prospective AmeriCorps program creates work group to execute the application process.
	AmeriCorps Application sent in via the eGrants on-line application system.

Organization Assessment Checklist

This checklist is to help you review the systems and programs within your organization. It can help you identify ways to strengthen your organization.

Planning Regarding the Total Organization

Rating *	Indicator	Met	Needs Work	N/A
Indicators ratings: E=essential; R=recommended; A=additional to strengthen organizational activities				
E	1. The organization's purpose and activities meet community needs.			
R	2. The organization frequently evaluates, by soliciting community input, whether its mission and activities provide benefit to the community.			
R	3. The organization has a value statement that is reflected in the agency's activities and is communicated by its constituents.			
A	4. The value statement includes standards of ethical behavior and respect for other's interests.			
E	5. The organization has a clear, meaningful written mission statement which reflects its purpose, values and people served.			
R	6. The board and staff periodically review the mission statement and modify it to reflect changes in the environment.			
E	7. The board and staff developed and adopted a written strategic plan to achieve its mission.			
A	8. Board, staff, service recipients, volunteers, key constituents and general members of the community participate in the planning process.			
E	9. The plan was developed by researching the internal and external environment.			
R	10. The plan identifies the changing community needs including the agency's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.			
R	11. The planning process identifies the critical issues facing the organization.			
R	12. The plan sets goals and measurable objectives that address these critical issues.			
E	13. The plan integrates all the organization's activities around a focused mission.			
R	14. The plan prioritizes the agency goals and develops timelines for their accomplishments.			
A	15. The plan establishes an evaluation process and performance indicators to measure the progress toward the achievement of goals and objectives.			
R	16. Through work plans, human and financial resources are allocated to insure the accomplishment of the goals in a timely fashion.			
A	17. The plan is communicated to all stakeholders of the agency -- service recipients, board, staff, volunteers and the general community.			

Planning Regarding the Organization's Programs

Rating *	Indicator	Met	Needs Work	N/A
Indicators ratings: E=essential; R=recommended; A=additional to strengthen organizational activities				
E	1. Programs are congruent with the agency's mission and strategic plan.			
A	2. The organization actively informs the public about its programs and services.			

A	3. Clients and potential clients have the opportunity to participate in program development.			
R	4. Sufficient resources are allocated to ensure each program can achieve the established goals and objectives.			
R	5. Staff has sufficient training and skill level to produce the program.			
A	6. Programs within the organization are integrated to provide more complete services to clients.			
R	7. Each program has performance indicators to insure that the program meets its goals and objectives.			
R	8. Performance indicators are reviewed annually.			
A	9. The agency networks and/or collaborates with other organizations to produce the most comprehensive and effective services to clients.			

Planning Regarding the Organization's Evaluations

Rating *	Indicator	Met	Needs Work	N/A
Indicators ratings: E=essential; R=recommended; A=additional to strengthen organizational activities				
R	1. Every year, the organization evaluates its activities to determine progress toward goal accomplishment.			
A	2. Stakeholders are involved in the evaluation process.			
R	3. The evaluation includes a review of organizational programs and systems to insure that they comply with the organization's mission, values and goals.			
R	4. The results of the evaluation are reflected in the revised plan.			
A	5. Periodically, the organization conducts a comprehensive evaluation of its programs. This evaluation measures program outcomes.			

Source: *United Way of Minneapolis Area*