



Opportunity Pathways

AmeriCorps' Role in Addressing America's Opportunity Youth Crisis

Authors
Serita Cox
Cole McMahan



Acknowledgements:

Serita Cox is a renowned leader in foster care and youth development. As a foster care alumna and co-founder of iFoster, she has guided the national nonprofit organization in supporting foster youth during their transition to self-sufficiency while building the largest national community with foster care lived experience. Under her leadership, iFoster has received recognition for its impactful TAY AmeriCorps programs. Serita has also held executive-level management positions at Fortune 100 companies and has worked as a strategy consultant, focusing on child welfare and juvenile justice. She brings valuable experience as the former Vice President of Strategy and Business Operations for a \$500 million business line at 3Com Corporation.

Serita's exceptional youth advocacy and leadership work has earned her recognition from the White House Office of Social Innovation, the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, and organizations such as Echoing Green. She has also been honored with the Irvine Foundation Leadership Award in 2022. With a strong educational background, including a BSc in Biochemistry and Biotechnology and an MBA in Strategy and Marketing, Serita demonstrates her commitment to academic excellence and professional achievement. She serves on the Board of Directors of GirlTrek, an international nonprofit focused on promoting a healthy lifestyle in Black communities

Cole McMahon has devoted his career to inventing, scaling and sustaining national service programs. With Amanda Sodoma McMahon, Cole leads the McMahon Consulting Group, a firm committed to strengthening the capacity of nonprofit organizations, corporations and government agencies to forge solutions to pressing problems. In his 29 years in the field, he has the distinction of leading both AmeriCorps*State and National programs and serving as a Commissioner and Commission program and training officer. He has placed AmeriCorps members in 50 states, quadrupled the budgets of two programs, and designed programs to help victims of disasters from the Joplin tornado and Hurricane Katrina to the BP oil spill and the foreclosure crisis. In the most recent grant cycle, MCG helped organizations secure over \$14M in AmeriCorps funds. Cole and Amanda are proud AmeriParents, with a child recently having finished terms in the Utah and Washington Conservation Corps.

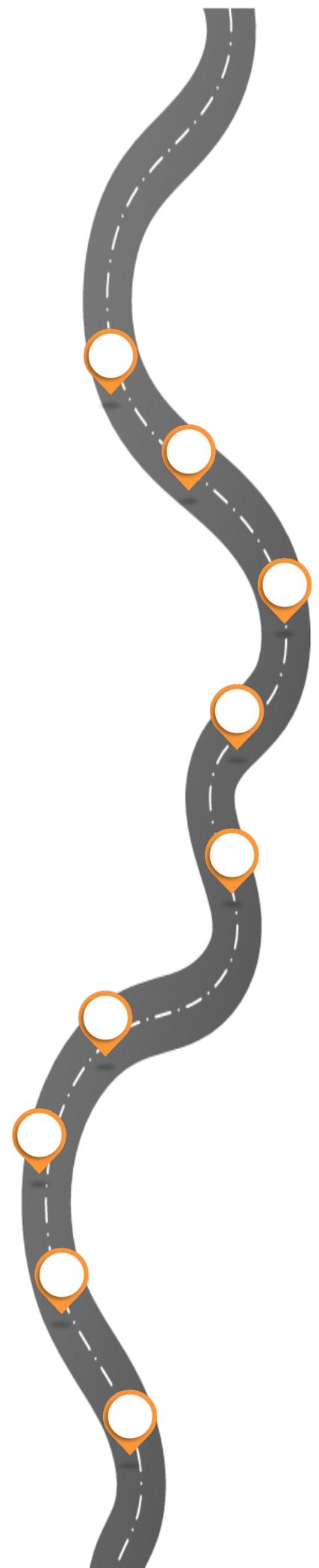
Desiree Lockridge and **Xavier Roberson** served as key researchers for this project, conducting and compiling interviews, spending hours following up with programs and mining 115 program survey responses for themes and findings. These iFoster AmeriCorps members and alumni reached out to every program they could find, contacting them (repeatedly) to seek their input and collect survey responses: **Anayyah Baker, Donovan Elwood, Payeton Heifner, Raul Lopez, Frances McGill, Haley Nelson, Jeremiah Orallo, Shoshana Providence and Tatiana Sutton. Carina Mendoza-Herbert** single-handedly connected with nearly every AmeriCorps*National program. While the survey data has value for practitioners and policy makers, the long-term impact of the TAY AmeriCorps research team may be sharing their stories with the 624 program with whom they communicated. If engagement raises awareness and changes minds and hearts, then the Research Team introduced many AmeriCorps programs to Opportunity Youth in AmeriCorps, and showed them the difference service has made in their lives.

AmeriCorps members serving with the Pennsylvania Mountain Service Corps (**Emily Beam, Vanessa Ewt, Allison Grieco and Imani Vaughn**) and Washington Conservation Corps (**Finn Maunder, Liam McMahon and Allison Tros**) agreed to participate in focus groups, providing extremely nuanced insights.

iFoster is grateful to the AmeriCorps Agency leadership for entrusting us with a unique planning grant opportunity– not to create a new AmeriCorps program, but to create pathways to opportunity that will benefit all programs. **Erin Croix** is committed to compliance, excellence and innovation. She is everything a Portfolio Manager should be.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a youth crisis in America. Four to five million youth aged 16 to 24, representing 12% of the youth population, are neither working nor in school. Once disconnected, it is difficult to achieve living wage employment, careers, and financial stability. Instead, it is more than likely they never reach their potential and will cost taxpayers trillions of dollars in tax and social burdens.

Foster youth, in particular, are on a trajectory of failure through no fault of their own. Removed from their homes due to neglect, abuse or violence, they suffer the worst outcomes of any youth population. An estimated 20% will become homeless the moment they age out of the foster care system. Within 4 years of aging out, 50% of foster youth will be unemployed and those employed will be earning only \$7,500 annually. Only 3% will achieve a post-secondary degree by age 24 compared to 47% of their low socio-economic peers.

It is not that these young people choose to be disconnected. The majority want to be employed and desire a post-secondary degree. However, there are too many barriers blocking their path to stable, living wage careers. While government programs do exist to reconnect them, these programs serve less than 10% of this Opportunity Youth population annually. Further, the majority of these programs are of insufficient duration with limited supports to truly enable reconnection, particularly for those most disadvantaged such as foster youth. Programs like Job Corps and YouthBuild that do provide longer term employment and education reconnection pathways are focused on high school attainment and technical or vocational trades. Missing is the coordinated programming that can reconnect these Opportunity Youth and provide them the runway and scaffolding supports needed to enable them to get on a solid professional career pathway.

AmeriCorps State and National programs have been proven to support professional success. Studies have shown that AmeriCorps alumni are more likely than the average American to attain a bachelor's degree or higher. Eighty percent of those who served say that AmeriCorps benefited their career path. There is no reason why this cannot extend to Opportunity Youth. In fact, iFoster with its award-winning TAY (transition-age foster youth) AmeriCorps programs, among other existing AmeriCorps programs, has shown that even the most marginalized of Opportunity Youth, foster youth, can find success and a springboard to self-sufficiency and professional careers through service. The breadth and diversity of AmeriCorps State and National programs can provide professional pathways for thousands of foster and opportunity youth nationwide.

With this conviction, iFoster, through an AmeriCorps State and National planning grant, undertook a study to identify the willingness and capacity of programs to increase the number of Opportunity Youth serving in AmeriCorps and the barriers that have prevented programs from engaging them. The study also analyzed programs that successfully engage Opportunity Youth as a significant portion of their corps. A gap analysis between programs willing but lacking experience and those with experience in engaging Opportunity Youth was used to propose a model for supporting Opportunity Youth nationwide to serve in any AmeriCorps program.

The results are compelling. While only 6% of AmeriCorps State and National programs have 15% or more of their corps membership made up of Opportunity Youth, 95% of programs are open to engaging Opportunity Youth as members. Fifty-eight percent of programs would be willing to build their program's capability to ensure that their membership reflects today's youth population with at least 10% of their members being Opportunity Youth. An additional 37% are willing but are hesitant of the impact this may have on their ability to meet performance metrics and remain competitive within their state.

What is needed to bridge the gap between "willing" and "able" is a series of supports for programs and for young people. iFoster proposes the creation of Opportunity Pathways, an AmeriCorps program focused on preparing and supporting Opportunity Youth for service. Akin to first generation college student programs that prepare and support first generation students to persist in college, Opportunity Pathways would prepare Opportunity Youth for service by investing in professional skills development and by providing connections to needed resources and supportive social services. Opportunity Pathways could become a recruitment and development channel for all AmeriCorps programs willing to engage Opportunity Youth. This pre-service model could scaffold Opportunity Youth to the level of professional proficiency they need to succeed within AmeriCorps while also providing ongoing supports through their term of service once enrolled as an AmeriCorps member. Combined with technical assistance to programs on cultural competency, professional development, and how to leverage existing Opportunity Youth funding to augment AmeriCorps cost per MSY, the resulting model of pre-service preparation and AmeriCorps service in a program adequately supported to engage Opportunity Youth is a reconnection vehicle for our country's most vulnerable young people and a steppingstone to post-secondary education and professional careers.

AmeriCorps has already set out its strategic goals, first among them, to alleviate poverty and advance racial equity. What better way to do so than to become an inclusive agent of change itself? If AmeriCorps State and National programs were to commit to devoting at least 10% of their corps member slots to Opportunity Youth, AmeriCorps could become one of the most significant reconnection interventions for Opportunity Youth nationwide. Within a year, upwards of 10,000 Opportunity Youth could build their professional skills, expand their educational opportunities, and start careers through service while also positively impacting their communities and finding value in themselves as positive contributing citizens. Over the next five years, 50,000 Opportunity Youth could be on their path to professional careers in education, health/public health, environment, social services, and child welfare to name a few, transforming the very systems that have failed them. Imagine the change that a professional, service-oriented army of Opportunity Youth can have on poverty, homelessness, and racial inequity in this country.

["AmeriCorps Service has further confirmed my purpose in life and my reasoning for doing the work I choose to do. I have been able to grow and learn from this experience."](#) iFoster TAY AmeriCorps Member and Foster Youth

1.0 | OPPORTUNITY YOUTH: OUR NATIONAL CHALLENGE

There are between 4 and 5 million youth aged 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor working. They represent approximately 12% of the youth population¹. These young people, referred to as 'Opportunity Youth' by the White House Council for Community Solutions in their 2012 report "Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth"², are more likely to be low income, child welfare and/or justice system involved, living with disabilities, and youth of color than the general youth population.

Once disconnected, these young people are far less likely to achieve permanent, living-wage employment, careers, and financial stability. Only 10% of Opportunity Youth will ever earn a college degree, at a time when most family-supporting wage jobs require training or credentials beyond high school. By 2027, 70% of jobs will require post-secondary education or training according to the U.S. Department of Education³.

This unfulfilled potential can lead to a lifetime of instability including un- and underemployment, homelessness, and dependence on government benefits. The U.S. can ill-afford these disconnections. According to the 2016 Bridge to Reconnection report, "In 2011 alone, disconnection of 16-24-year-olds cost taxpayers \$93.7 billion in government support and lost taxpayer revenue. In addition, a 2012 study estimated that the lifetime economic burden of the 2012 cohort of Opportunity Youth would be \$1.6 trillion to taxpayers and \$4.7 trillion to society."⁴ The bottom line is that for every Opportunity Youth American society fails to reconnect, this costs not only the loss of a productive citizen early in their workforce years, but costs society nearly \$1 Million in direct taxpayer and social costs over that individual youth's lifetime.⁵ The successful reconnection of these youth must be a national priority.

¹ Measure of America, Youth Disconnection Nationally, 2021, <https://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/>

² White House Council on Community Solutions, "Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth: Final Report", 2012,

https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/White_House_Council_For_Community_Solutions_Final_Report.pdf

³ "Raise the Bar: Postsecondary and Career Pathways", U.S. Department of Education, <https://www.ed.gov/raisethebar/postsecondary-pathways>

⁴ Civic Enterprises, "A Bridge to Reconnection", 2016, <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/BridgetoReconnection.2016.pdf>

⁵ Belfied, Clive; Levin, Henry M.; and Rosen, R., The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth, January 2012, New York, NY: Corporation for National and Community Service and the White House Council for Community Solutions, https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Economic_Value_of_Opportunity_Youth_Report.pdf

2.0 | AMERICORPS FOR ALL NATIONAL PLANNING GRANT

In January 2023, iFoster was awarded an AmeriCorps planning grant to determine how AmeriCorps could become a springboard for Transition-age Foster Youth, a sub-population of Opportunity Youth, as they exit foster care and strive to become self-sufficient. The goal of the planning grant was to understand if and how foster youth could successfully serve in AmeriCorps programs nationwide.

The planning grant project aligned with AmeriCorps's strategic goal #1, *Partner with Communities to Alleviate Poverty and Advance Racial Equity*, and the supporting objective of 1.5 *Recruit a diverse corps of members and volunteers who reflect those we are serving*. The project first sought to understand the current state of corps membership with respect to Opportunity Youth serving as members. A survey (Appendix A) was developed covering:

- Current engagement levels of Opportunity Youth serving in programs;
- Reasons why programs did or did not have Opportunity Youth serving;
- Barriers and challenges programs encountered with trying to engage Opportunity Youth;
- Program willingness to engage Opportunity Youth as members given the right resources and supports.

A team of 15 current and former foster youth who were serving as AmeriCorps members in iFoster's TAY AmeriCorps program identified staff contacts and reached out to 624 AmeriCorps State and National programs, as well as every state service commission, requesting their participation in the survey.⁶ One hundred and fifteen programs, representing 18% of programs contacted, completed the survey. From survey respondents, the team also conducted deep dive interviews with 20 programs of varying degrees of experience in engaging Opportunity Youth as members to gain further understanding of best practices, challenges, and barriers.

Based on survey and deep dive interview results, a readiness rubric was developed. This rubric was reviewed by the foster youth AmeriCorps member team and iFoster's AmeriCorps program staff. Their feedback based on lived and programmatic experiences was incorporated. The resulting rubric (Figure 1) provides a measurement tool to gauge a program's readiness to engage Opportunity Youth as members across four major dimensions: service readiness, preparing partners, ongoing supports, and securing funding. This rubric was used to measure responding programs readiness on average and by current engagement level (i.e. unready, emerging, adept, expert). Scores within each of the four major dimensions informed the design of a proposed model to support Opportunity Youth in successfully serving in any AmeriCorps program.

⁶ These members serve within TAY AmeriCorps, a program focused on seeking and securing resources and opportunities for transition-age foster youth (aged 16 to 24). This project was deemed within their service description by the AmeriCorps Agency.

Figure 1. Program Opportunity Youth Readiness Rubric



3.0 | ENGAGING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AS MEMBERS: REPORT FROM THE FIELD

3.1 Representative Sample Size

This project surveyed 115 programs from across the country. Programs spanned the AmeriCorps areas of focus, geographies, and size such that iFoster believes it achieved a representative set of programs from which results, analysis and conclusions based on their responses could be extrapolated across the AmeriCorps State and National landscape.

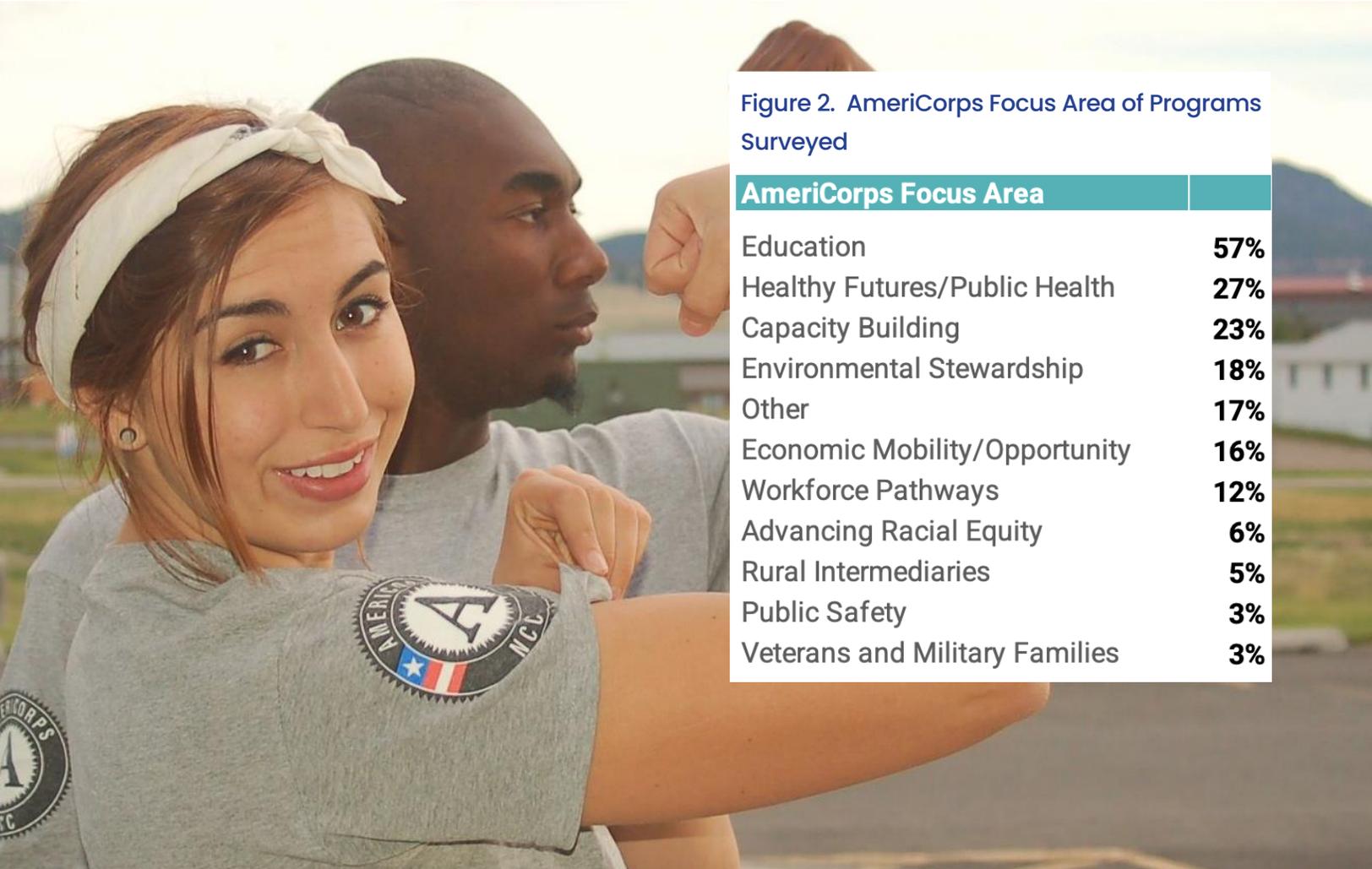


Figure 2. AmeriCorps Focus Area of Programs Surveyed

AmeriCorps Focus Area	
Education	57%
Healthy Futures/Public Health	27%
Capacity Building	23%
Environmental Stewardship	18%
Other	17%
Economic Mobility/Opportunity	16%
Workforce Pathways	12%
Advancing Racial Equity	6%
Rural Intermediaries	5%
Public Safety	3%
Veterans and Military Families	3%

Figure 3. Location of Programs Surveyed

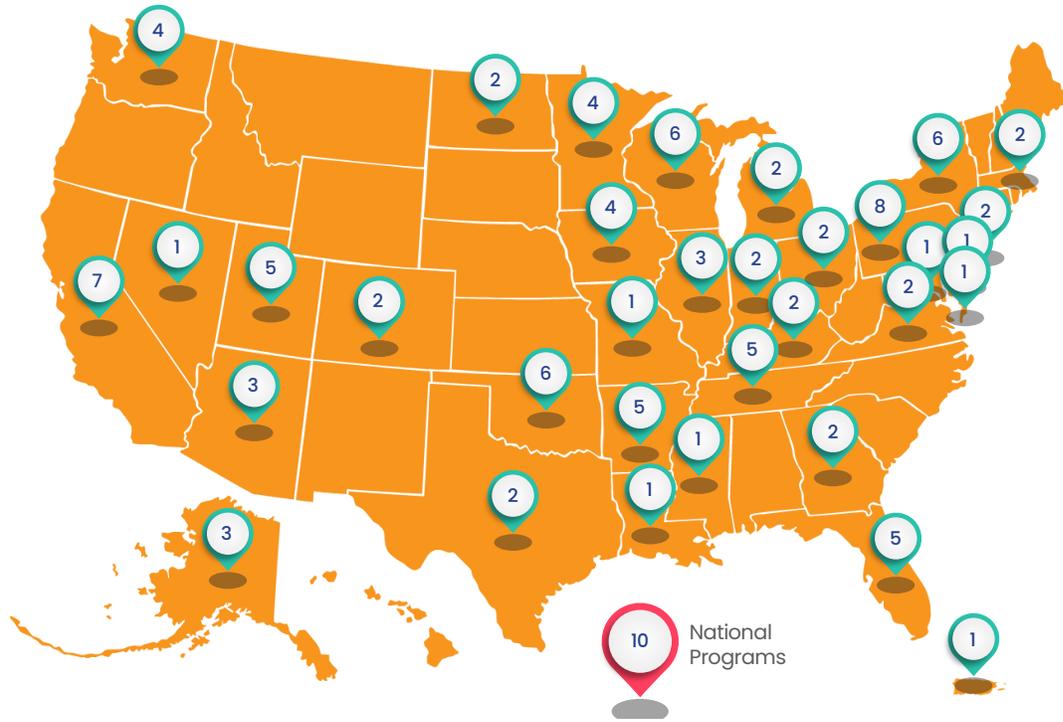
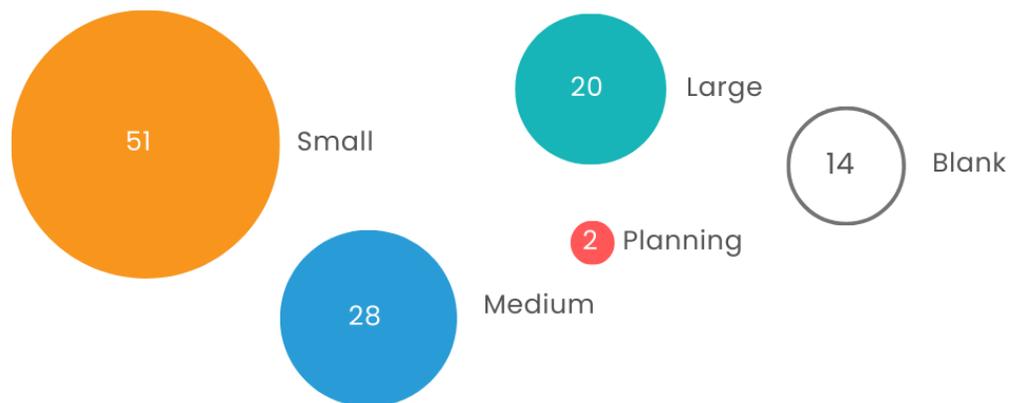


Figure 3. Programs Survey by MSY Size



3.1 Few Programs have Experience with Opportunity Youth as Members

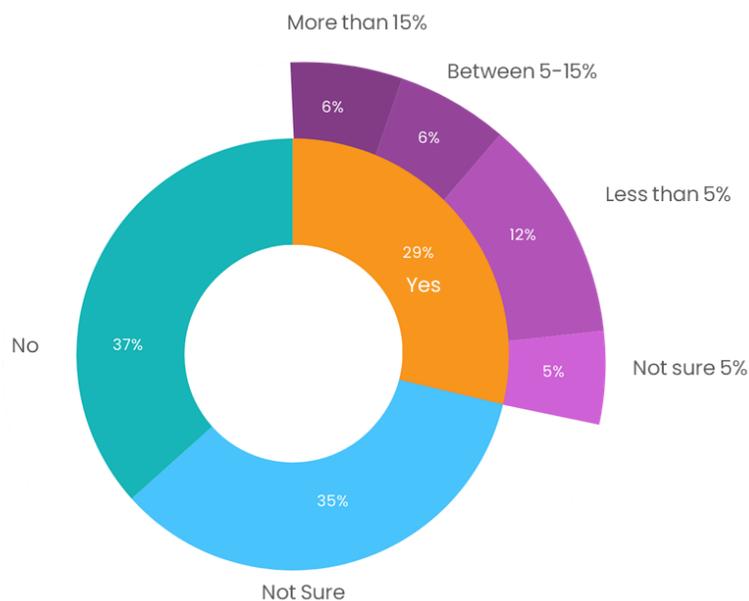
While many AmeriCorps programs serve children and youth from low-income, foster care or juvenile justice communities, only 6% of 115 programs surveyed are designed to incorporate Opportunity Youth as members. This finding is aligned with the AmeriCorps FY2025 Congressional Budget Justification report which stated that AmeriCorps membership remains over-represented with members of higher socioeconomic status⁷.

Twenty-nine percent of programs surveyed did have some familiarity with Opportunity Youth as members, either as a specific program recruitment priority or because their mission is to serve disconnected youth. Several respondents reported that they assumed Opportunity Youth did serve in their programs, but they do not have mechanisms to track socio-economic status in their enrollment data.

Among the programs that have experience engaging Opportunity Youth as members, the level of participation varies:

- “Experienced” group (22%) states that enrolling Opportunity Youth is a feature of their program and Opportunity Youth members comprise 15% or more of their corps;
- “Familiar” programs (26%) report engaging Opportunity Youth as a priority and that they make up 5% to 15% of members;
- “Inexperienced” programs (52%) engage Opportunity Youth “from time to time” and that they make up less than 5% of their membership.

Figure 4. Program Experience with Opportunity Youth Members



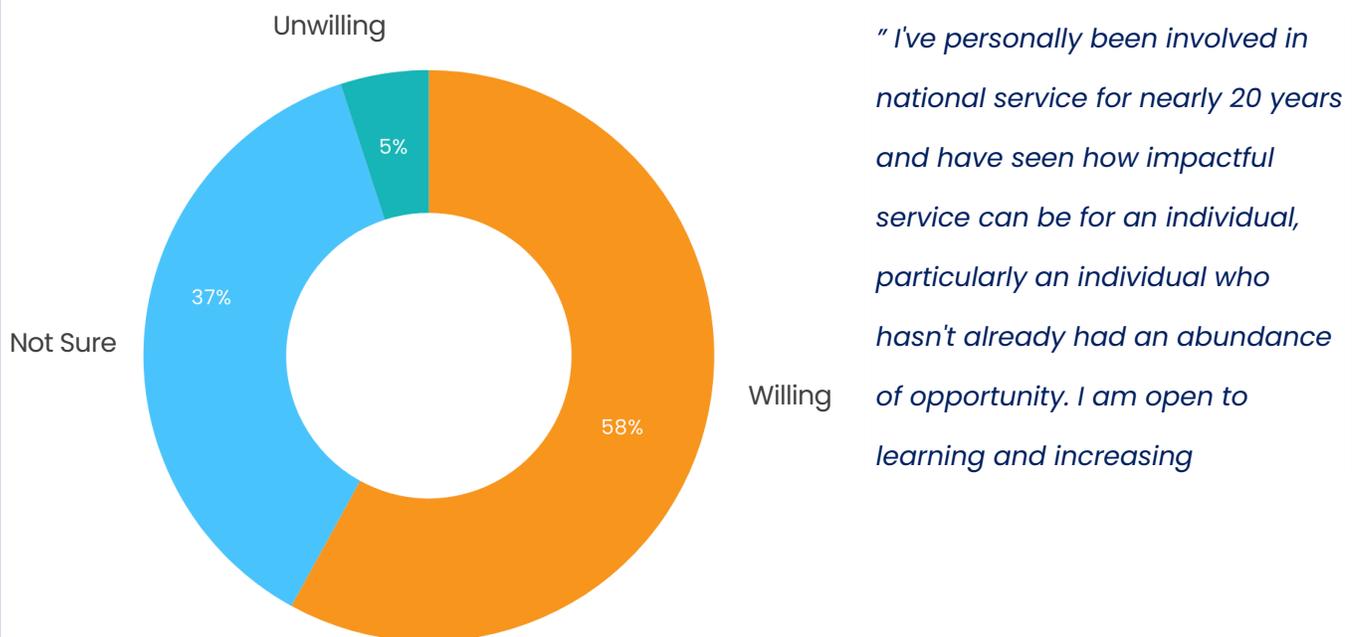
⁷ 2022 and 2023 results for strategic objective 1.5 Recruit a Diverse Corps of Members, AmeriCorps FY2025 Congressional Budget Justification

3.3 Majority of Programs are Willing to have Opportunity Youth Members

Per the AmeriCorps FY2025 Congressional Budget Justification report, AmeriCorps State and National has been holding steady at 73% member enrollment since 2022. Further, a survey by Voices for National Service found that workforce readiness is the principal recruitment challenge across all types of member candidates, not just Opportunity Youth, leading many programs to consider the need for training potential candidates as part of the recruitment and selection process.

Faced with structural under-enrollment, programs are more open to recruit more Opportunity Youth as members. Fifty-eight percent of programs surveyed would be willing to build their program's capability to engage Opportunity Youth as at least 10% of their corps. Thirty-seven percent said they would be willing but were unsure about committing, particularly if the potential impact to their performance metrics and grant competitiveness was not mitigated. **This increased willingness reflects the recognition that traditional recruitment efforts and targets are insufficient, and seeking only "corps-ready members" is not always feasible.** Focusing on Opportunity Youth aligns with AmeriCorps strategic objective of increasing the diversity of corps membership. Of note, all willing programs stated that they would need to be provided with additional resources to achieve any meaningful and consistent Opportunity Youth enrollment targets.

Figure 5. Majority of Programs are Willing Make 10% of their Corps OY



3.4 Key Learnings from Programs based on their Experience

Four types of programs emerged that were to varying degrees experienced and willing to engage Opportunity Youth members in their corps:

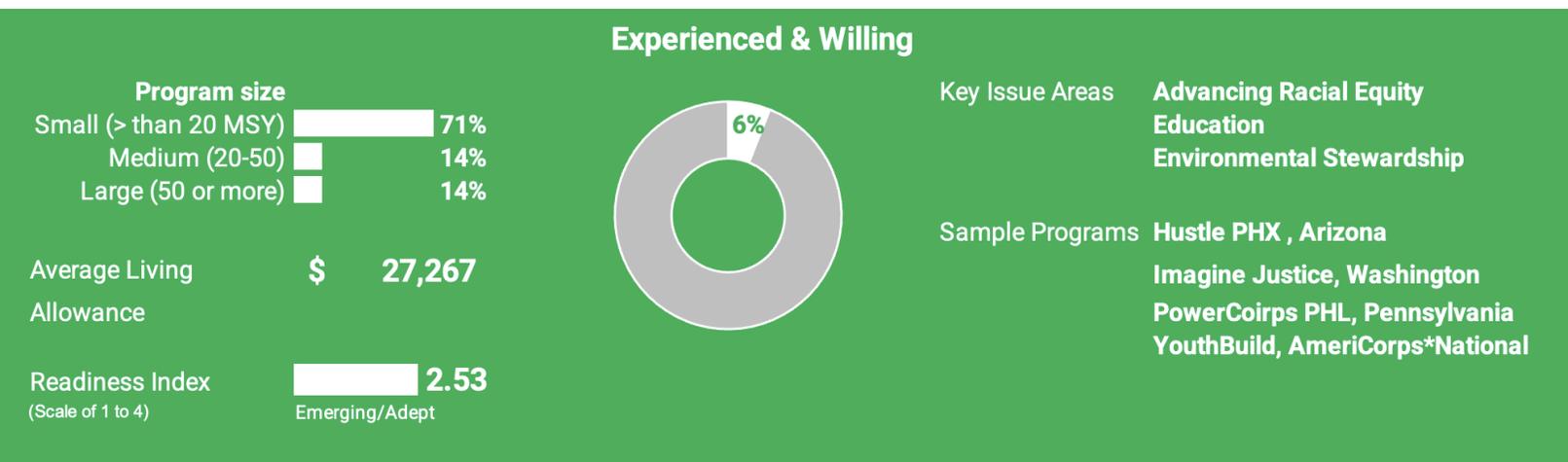
1) Experienced and Willing: 6% of programs actively engage Opportunity Youth as members as part of their core program model (15% or more of their corps) and would continue to do so. Further, these programs would be willing to share their best practices, training curriculums, and toolkits with other programs.

2) Familiar and Willing: 15% of programs routinely engage Opportunity Youth as members as 5%-10% of their corps. These programs are willing to adopt this as part of their model, but express the need for funding and supports in order to do so.

3) Inexperienced and Willing: 38% of programs have little to no experience of having Opportunity Youth as members but are willing to engage them with the right supports and training.

4) Not Sure: 36% of programs have little to no experience and are concerned that Opportunity Youth members will impact their program model, their ability to meet host site expectations, and achieve their performance metrics. The majority of these programs are AmeriCorps State Competitive programs and are concerned about the risk of failing to meet the requirements to remain competitive.

A small number (5%) of programs said they would be unwilling to engage Opportunity Youth because they either have eligibility requirements (such as a specific college degree) or operate as a close-looped system (higher education programs that recruit only their own students). However, even these programs might be willing given the right supports and candidates that met their eligibility criteria.



Experienced and Willing programs enroll Opportunity Youth as members at a rate that is higher than their representation in the population. Nearly all Experienced and Willing programs recruit almost *exclusively* from the Opportunity Youth population, which is very often the population they serve. These programs invest heavily in training, including pre-service training, staff support, and increased living allowance. They recognize

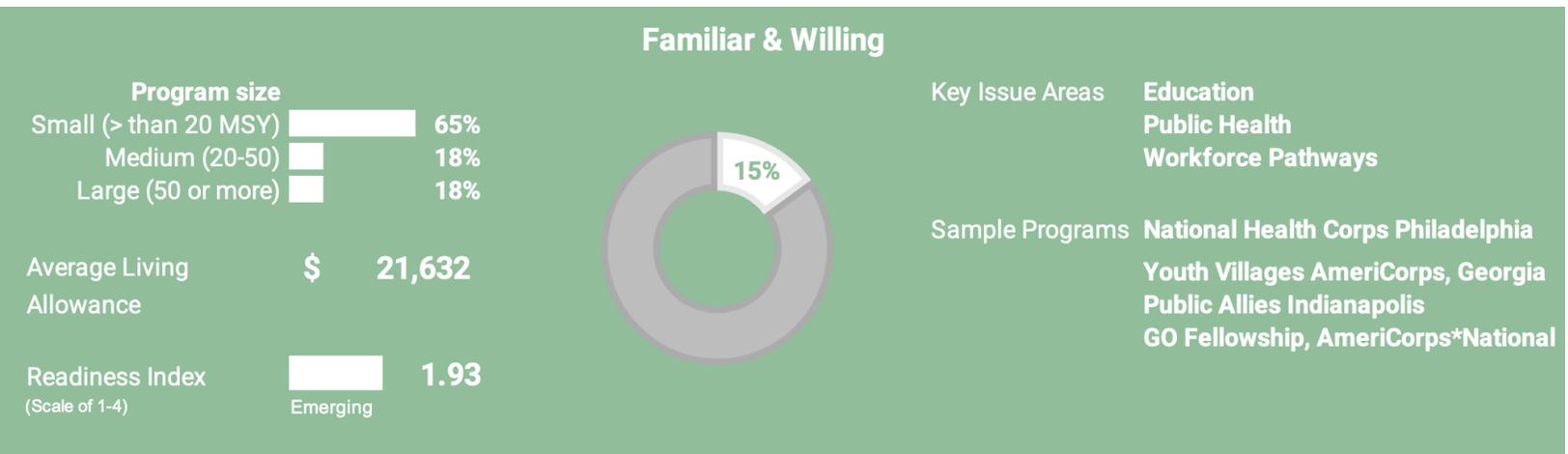
the need for ongoing coaching and the continued need to connect their members to supportive services and resources. Their biggest challenges are raising sufficient funds to provide the level of supports needed and being able to refer members to appropriate supportive services to meet individual member needs. (See Appendix B for case studies.)

Of the 115 programs iFoster researchers contacted, only 6% said that their program model is based on engaging Opportunity Youth as greater than 15% of their corps. Most are local, small programs with fewer than 20 members that are well-funded and can provide high touch coaching and case management. However, a few larger programs like PowerPHL, iFoster, and YouthBuild have demonstrated that a commitment to Opportunity Youth corps members can be a scalable model. YouthBuild was founded in 1978 and engages 2,000 opportunity youth annually across its network of 230 programs focused on construction as their service and high school attainment and job skills for their members. A longitudinal evaluation of YouthBuild’s impact showed that “the program provides a starting point for redirecting otherwise disconnected young people, but one that could be improved upon.”⁸ Improvements noted are particularly in the areas of permanent employment, not temporary or other types of informal work common in the construction trades.

“Our model is already designed around this-- the biggest challenge is raising enough money to provide the level of supports needed for our members (living allowance, training, benefits, staff support).”- Kaitlin Ohler, Imagine Justice

“We could definitely use the support of partners in helping referred candidates to navigate their supportive services needs before acceptance into PowerCorpsPHL.” -Matthew Woodruff

Overall, Experienced and Willing programs report a 2.53 Readiness Index, essentially rating themselves between a B-minus and a C-plus. This is the highest rated group of programs.



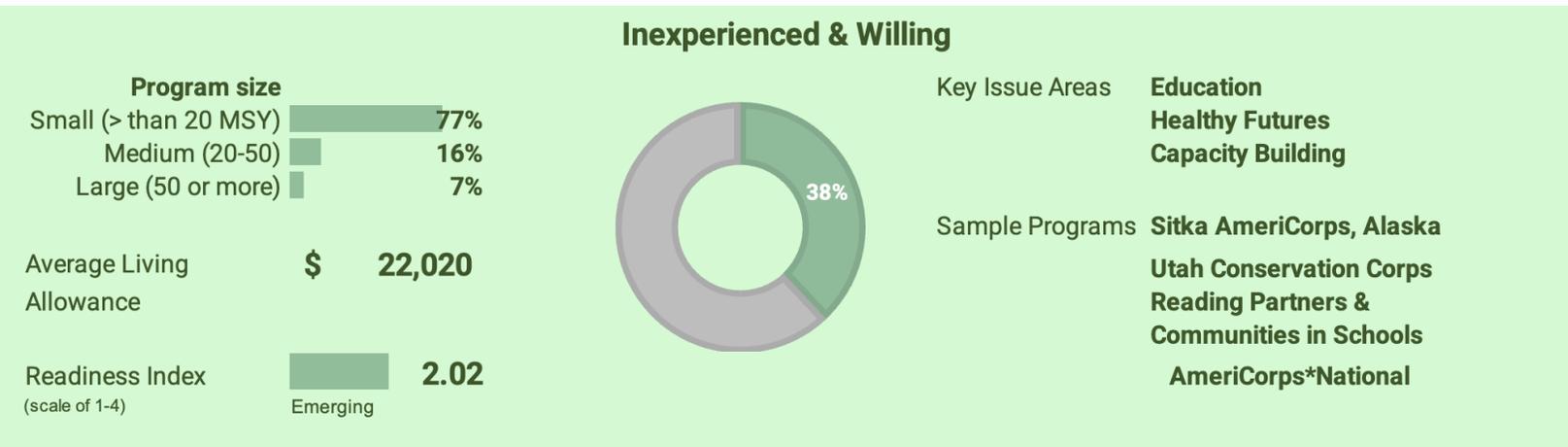
⁸ Laying the Foundation: Four-Year Results from the National YouthBuild Evaluation, MDRC Center for Effective Career and Technical Education, May 2018

Programs that reported Opportunity Youth represent 5-10% of their enrollment are referred to as “Familiar and Willing.” These programs routinely engage Opportunity Youth as corps members but tend not to invest fully in what is needed to support them. Programs that routinely engage Opportunity Youth as an element of their program make up 15% of the field.

While they have the cultural competency to recognize what is needed to best support Opportunity Youth members, they don’t have the staffing or the funding to fully meet their needs. These programs typically have lower living allowances and insufficient program staff to provide the coaching and case management needed. While they recognize that Opportunity Youth members often need supportive services, they don’t have the capacity to do more than refer them to a resource hotline such as 2-1-1 for support. Many don’t have the pre-service time built into their program to provide necessary job skills building prior to the start of service, even if they did have the staff and curriculums to do such training.

“I love the idea of figuring out how to bring more Opportunity/ TAY youth into the AmeriCorps programs! Our biggest hurdle for them in the past has been the living allowance and lack of financial security for them. We have had a number of previous foster youth in our program and find it very rewarding to help them develop professionally!”

Overall, Familiar and Willing programs report a 1.93 Readiness Index, essentially rating themselves between a C-minus and a C average. These programs rated themselves the lowest of any group, possibly due to an increased awareness of the capacity needed to effectively support Opportunity Youth.

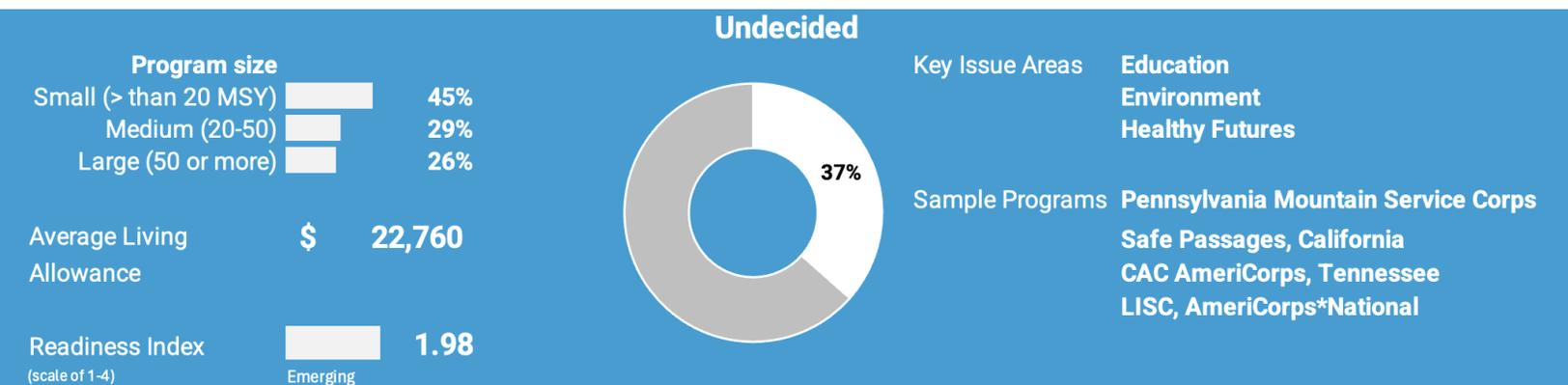


Programs which describe themselves as “Inexperienced and Willing” comprise 38% of the respondents, the largest group, and the group with the most variance in responses. For instance, living allowance ranges from the minimum allowable to \$30,800. Almost 90% of these programs say that they would need more funding for member living allowance in order to engage Opportunity Youth as members. Staff and host site cultural competency and trauma-informed training would also be required. Some question whether host sites would be willing to take on Opportunity Youth members, especially if the host site were paying for them. None have

any significant pre-service training that would encompass basic job skills attainment, rather they expect their members to be “service ready”.

“The biggest adjustment we would need to make would be figuring out how to provide a higher living allowance or housing stipend. We could also adjust the training and support prior to the interview and hiring process. We could also use more training on how to best support these youth.”

Overall, Inexperienced and Willing programs report a 2.02 Readiness Index, essentially rating themselves a C, marginally higher than the Familiar and Willing group.



More than one-third (37%) of surveyed programs report that they “not sure” if they could commit to having 10% of their corps Opportunity Youth. These programs and program staff are more likely to be established and experienced as AmeriCorps grantees. Undecided programs have the highest percentage of medium and large corps size. Most are AmeriCorps State grantees, funded through the competitive process, which may be a reason for their risk intolerance. In addition, several programs expressed a concern that members must be able to pass a background check, reflecting a bias that many Opportunity Youth have criminal histories.

“Most significantly, we would need additional staff capacity to better support the unique needs of opportunity youth in addition to general needs of all members. We would also need further resources such as increase in living allowance, and housing support, which are the major barriers to opportunity youth who are alumni from our partner organizations to consider applying to our program.”

Overall, Undecided programs report a 1.98 Readiness Index, essentially rating themselves a C, nearly the same as the Inexperienced and Willing programs.

In summary, while the majority of AmeriCorps programs are willing to diversify their corps membership to include Opportunity Youth in a meaningful way, they are concerned about how they will do so within their existing program model design, staff experience, funding constraints, and AmeriCorps performance expectations.

Figure 6. Challenges to Engaging Opportunity Youth as Members

	Experienced & Willing	Familiar & Willing	Inexperienced & Willing	Undecided
Soft skill development prior to enrollment	2.25	2	2.1	2.1
Ensuring basic needs covered prior to service	1.5	1.7	1.7	1.6
Trauma informed training for staff	3.25	1.7	2.2	1.9
Ongoing resource navigation support	2.75	1.5	2.2	1.9
Ongoing member professional development	3	2.5	2.8	2.7
Ongoing supports (case management, coaching)	2.75	1.9	2	1.9
Additional Funds for Living Allowance	2.5	1.7	1.8	2
Additional Funds for program infrastructure	2	2.2	2.2	2



4.0 | PROGRAM READINESS – REPORT FROM THE FIELD

While the majority of programs are *willing* to move to a corps model which more closely reflects the diversity of the U.S. youth population, the challenges they raise impact their *readiness* to do so. Using the readiness rubric designed by AmeriCorps members with lived experience and staff with programmatic experience engaging Opportunity Youth members, iFoster measured each surveyed program’s readiness to engage Opportunity Youth as members across four major dimensions: service readiness, preparing partners, ongoing supports, and securing funding. The scores within each of the four major dimensions informed the design of a proposed model to support Opportunity Youth in successfully serving in any AmeriCorps program.

Surveyed programs were asked to rate their readiness on a 4-point scale with:

- 4= Our program should be recognized nationally for this; no support needed. (Expert)
- 3= We are confident we do this well, but we would benefit from more information. (Adept)
- 2= There is room here for us to improve, and we would welcome training and technical assistance. (Emerging)
- 1= This is an area we must address to move forward with Opportunity Youth as Members, and we need support. (Unready)

The four-point scale programs used to rate themselves is similar to the rubric used to quantify grades in schools and to determine a student’s ranking. The “Readiness Index”, an overall average across all indicators, equates to a grade point average. For instance, the overall average across programs and categories is 2.06, meaning that across the nation, programs give themselves a C average on readiness to engage Opportunity Youth as members.

Note: Quotes (in italics) from program staff are anonymized.



Figure 7a. Average Program Readiness Assessment

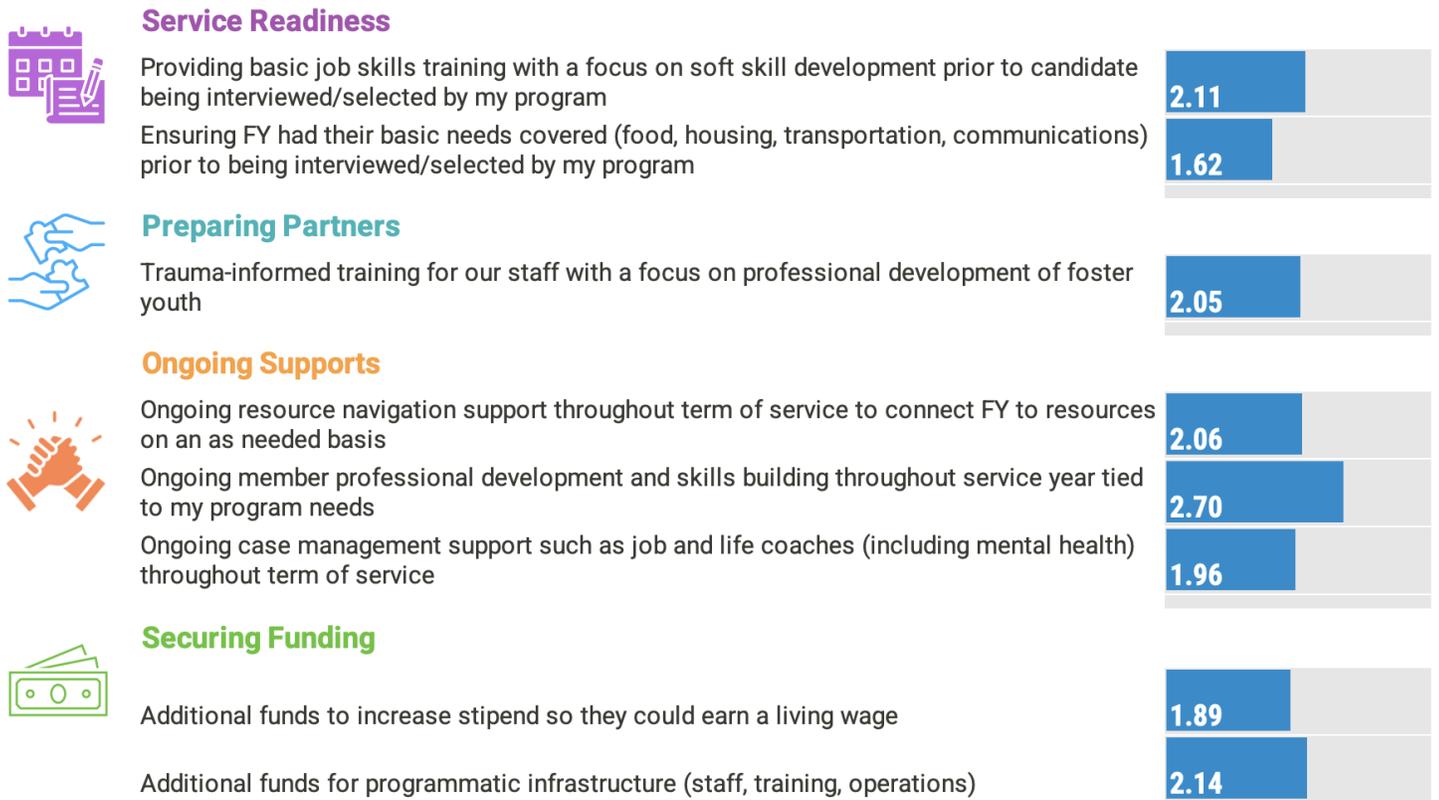
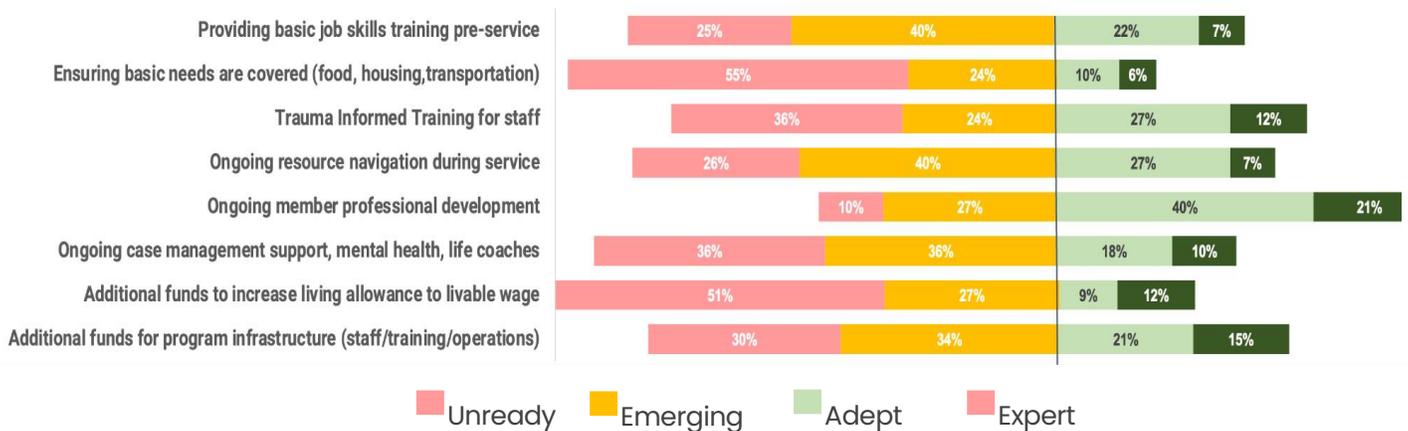


Figure 7b. Program Readiness Assessment Breakdown



This chart shows that most programs rate themselves as a One (Unready, light red) or Two (Emerging, orange) on a scale of one to four. A clear lesson is that any one area of improvement would be insufficient for programs to effectively engage Opportunity Youth.

Service Readiness

1. Providing basic job skills training with a focus on soft skill development prior to candidate being interviewed/selected by my program Overall: 2.11

Across the country, employers lament the lack of a career-ready workforce of high school and college graduates. Some issues of workforce readiness are near universal – a lack of educational attainment and workplace skills can lead young people to miss out on “employability skills” (communication, team-work, problems solving, time management) and “technical skills” (computer literacy, basic math, literacy). With fewer networks and social capital, young people may not develop self-confidence, the ability to advocate for themselves, or even understand how to look for work.

A lack of soft skills for AmeriCorps members is increasingly a problem – regardless of whether they are Opportunity Youth or not. This was repeatedly brought up by program staff. However, program staff did state their concern that Opportunity Youth candidates might require even more basic job skills training than they already are having to do. Opportunity Youth will require *“more foundational skills, job etiquette, how to write and send emails... a whole range of things.”*

Twenty-nine percent of programs said they did or could provide basic job skills training with a focus on soft skills development during pre-service. Baltimore Corps, for example, has a model that incorporates soft skills and job readiness training into the recruitment and selection process. All candidates engage with the organization and host sites for months before the program starts to ensure optimal fit and preparation for the role. Even the candidates who are not ready receive opportunities and resources to find work.

“... we would want to make sure that we are intentional about workplace skill development to ensure that they are successful in their terms.”

However, the majority of programs stated they did not have a program model that provided sufficient pre-service time, they lacked appropriate soft skill development curriculums, and lacked staff time and expertise to provide the necessary trainings to get Opportunity Youth candidates “service ready”.

2. Ensuring Opportunity Youth had their basic needs covered prior to being interviewed/selected by my program Overall: 1.62

While many prospective members are entering a new phase of life or moving to a new community, most programs do not have the means or a process in place to support applicants before they start a term of service. This is particularly challenging for Opportunity Youth, for whom stability is essential.

“All of our resources are currently dedicated to members post-enrollment. We are also a fixed-cost program, so do not request AmeriCorps funds beyond just the living allowance for members.”

Many programs require a candidate to have housing and transportation as a condition of enrollment in AmeriCorps. And many require members to have access to technology (i.e. laptop, phone, Internet). These policies could eliminate Opportunity Youth from consideration.

“Our target audience is college grad and undergrad students. Access to a vehicle and technology is a requirement, so this component may need to be adjusted.”

Helping candidates secure their basic needs was the single program indicator for which most programs rated themselves as Unready, “an area we must address to move forward with Opportunity Youth as Members”. However, pre-service barriers are not unique to Opportunity Youth. Many programs are already facing issues regarding candidates not having the basic supports necessary for service, with housing and transportation at the top of the list. Programs do not have good solutions to meet these needs today and worry that by bringing on Opportunity Youth candidates, these needs will grow.

“We would need external support for housing and transportation. It is really hard to live on AmeriCorps living allowance in New Orleans. Affordable, safe, clean housing is hard to come by. Every now and then we have members who don't or can't make it work. Some room with other members. We also need to figure out transportation. A number of our members don't have access to a personal vehicle. Some bike or carpool, but this requires planning and relationship building and time management. Members travel during the service day to go between build sites, or to meetings. Public transportation can be undependable. Relationships matter because people need to be picked up, or they may walk. We have done our best to work with members, and some can do it, but it takes initiative and forethought.”

Preparing Partners

3. Trauma-informed training for staff with a focus on professional development of Opportunity Youth. Overall: 2.05

It is not enough to be willing to engage Opportunity Youth as AmeriCorps members– programs must have the ability and agility to bring out the best in them. Most programs question whether they have the ability to do so.

“We need a Knowledge base: what is the support youth need? Impart the knowledge and skills to people in the field on how to provide that support.”

Even programs that provide trauma-informed training for staff express that members serve in the community with partners and that those host sites also need training.

“I think there is definitely the potential for us to engage Opportunity Youth. My concern is in preparing our host site managers/staff to be supportive of this endeavor.”

In addition to training and supervisory support, working with Opportunity Youth may affect program partnership fee structures.

“As an intermediary, we place our members with community partners who pay a partner match. This generally comes with a level of expectation of where the members are coming into their service. Our partners are generally pretty good about appreciating that AmeriCorps service is a balance of supporting the org and building the member. That said, in the past when members have had difficulties meeting basic expectations, they have a much higher chance of not completing their terms. The good news is that we are indexed to the living wage of our region and have strategies to maintain this over time, but for this level of expense a certain level of performance is assumed.”

Ongoing Supports

4. Ongoing resource navigation support throughout the term of service Overall: 2.06

AmeriCorps programs report that they would benefit from information, technical assistance and support to help members address basic needs and secure resources they need to be able to serve. Some programs are part of a larger organization that focuses on Opportunity Youth or sub-populations such as foster youth with multiple programs developed to serve them. For example, Public Allies Indianapolis engages a benefits specialist and case manager to help members secure housing, and to navigate appointments and eligibility for services.

The vast majority of programs surveyed indicate that they do not have the funding to provide in-house resource navigation and typically refer members to resource hotlines or other local services such as food banks and shelters to meet basic needs. Programs do note that increasingly all their members require resources and supportive services to meet basic needs such as housing, food, and transportation.

“Due to limited funding, we haven't been able to provide much in the community resource support area. Rather, we'll refer them to 2-1-1, or provide websites to local housing authorities,”

5. Ongoing member professional development and skills building throughout service year tied to my program needs Overall: 2.7

Member development is the only program element where more than half of surveyed programs rated themselves Adept or Expert. Most programs state they are adept at training members to fulfill their service descriptions and meet performance measures. Many do have ongoing professional development, but they tend to be geared at a higher level than youth experiencing their first work experiences. Increasingly, programs are realizing they need to be trauma-informed and provide de-escalation trainings, mental health trainings, and secondary trauma trainings.

"This is a lot for us. De-escalation trainings, crew leader trainings, mental health trainings. Financial training, financial literacy, resume/cover letter training. Accountability skills (being on time and understanding time off and how punctuality works)."

In addition, AmeriCorps members suggest that they need life skills development. No longer taught in schools, young adult members are finding that they don't know the basics of how to live on their own.

"What do we need to know?" said a current AmeriCorps member. "Life skills. Finances, taxes, budgeting. Home ec-- laundry, how to find a place to live... If AmeriCorps is our first "job", it would help to have a place where we could learn those things."

6. Ongoing case management support such as job and life coaches throughout term of service. Overall 1.96

Programs recognize the need for ongoing coaching and case management, but most do not have the funds to hire the staff that are needed. A small number of programs are part of larger organizations that do provide these services to clients outside of AmeriCorps service.

While a few programs noted that the ASC and Corps Network Member Assistance Programs (MAP) are an asset for programs, some suggested they are insufficient to meet current member needs.

"Members need a Mentor. One thing we hear over and over as we provide development, they want someone that can speak to about highs and lows, frustrations, feedback and advice, encourage them, suggest what they could do next time. And access to mental health services-- members can access services for free, but an Employee Assistance Program itself is not sufficient medical care-- more may be needed."

Again, programs recognize the need for consistent, indepth and ongoing support for their current members and express concern that if they cannot meet current needs, they could not manage the more intensive support needs for Opportunity Youth members.

Securing Funding

7. Additional funds to increase stipend so they could earn a living wage. Overall 1.89

8. Additional funds for programmatic infrastructure. Overall 2.14

By design, AmeriCorps programs are defined by a "cost per member service year" (MSY) value proposition, with incentives to keep costs as low as possible. While the most recent AmeriCorps Agency guidance raises the living allowance to an effective \$13/hour, this is still not a living wage in many parts of the country.

Further, the cost per MSY allocated to a program must also support program infrastructure costs even with external fundraising by programs. Programs state that they are struggling now with their current members

and fear that sustaining Opportunity Youth as members will be impossible without more resources and the ability to pay a living wage.

"Transitioning to independent living without sufficient parent or program supports is challenging for any young adult. For adults without safety nets, this is even more difficult. If you're on your own, you have to have a living allowance that works and doesn't put you in danger."

The second highest need described by programs is for help increasing AmeriCorps compensation in order to support Opportunity Youth.

"Our biggest barrier is additional financial needs for members. As a team we have conversations all the time that this only works for people who have family support. Anyone with children or medical bills cannot afford to pay for this."

The third highest need is funding for programmatic infrastructure.

"Yes, our program model may benefit from adding the suggested supports such as resource navigation, stipend increase, and additional funds for program infrastructure because we would need to hire at least one staff member to manage this program."

"Most significantly, we would need additional staff capacity to better support the unique needs of opportunity youth in addition to general needs of all members. We would also need further resources such as an increase in living allowance, and housing support, which are the major barriers to opportunity youth who are alumni from our partner organizations to consider applying to our program."

With such disparities between willingness to engage Opportunity Youth as AmeriCorps members and program readiness, it may appear that this is an intractable problem without sufficient infusion of funding and considerable rework of program models. However, solutions do exist. For example, colleges have been focused on increasing diversity, including economic diversity, of their student body for a long time. They have designed first generation college student programs that successfully onboard and help low-income students and those who are the first in their families go to college to persist and graduate. Specific fields of study such as law schools and medical schools also have proven models for engaging, scaffolding and supporting the successful graduation of under-represented constituencies. One key to success is building a program that runs alongside existing programs and provides the training, supports, and resources tailored to meet the needs of the target, under-represented group.

5.0 | Recommendations

Brookings, the Urban Institute and others have published studies saying that it takes a comprehensive approach to address Opportunity Youth reconnection, “that includes targeted education and training programs, wraparound support services, mentorship opportunities, and policies aimed at reducing barriers to employment and economic mobility.” (Economic Policy Institute). iFoster’s research confirms this. On their own, AmeriCorps programs have struggled to implement one or more programmatic enhancements to engage Opportunity Youth. Systemic change requires a consistent, multifaceted effort across the entire field.

Based on surveying the AmeriCorps State and National field, iFoster recommends the creation of Opportunity Pathways, a new AmeriCorps program which will:

1. Recruit and upskill Opportunity Youth to prepare them for service.
2. Provide AmeriCorps State and National Program technical assistance to prepare and support them engaging Opportunity Youth as members.
3. Provide technical assistance to help programs identify and blend existing Opportunity Youth specific funding streams with AmeriCorps funding to augment member stipends, program staffing and infrastructure to better support Opportunity Youth as members.



OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PROGRAM

Opportunity Pathways is a transformative program for Opportunity Youth, preparing them for service in any AmeriCorps State and National program while supporting these programs to better engage with them. Like first generation scholar programs in higher education, Opportunity Pathways is a feeder for AmeriCorps State and National programs.

This program would recruit and develop Opportunity Youth, get them “service-ready”; provide ongoing supports throughout their service term; and off-board them to employment opportunities and career and educational pathways. The program would also provide technical assistance and toolkits to the programs these Opportunity Youth serve in that would include cultural competency and trauma-informed training, professional development curriculums, education on supportive services, and “how to” guides for leveraging and braiding other government funding for Opportunity Youth reconnection.

The program would fit within the Economic Opportunity funding priority and provide the backbone support that Opportunity Youth need to succeed in their chosen service program. The AmeriCorps State and National program they would enroll in as members would provide the service opportunity and professional experience to develop the tangible skills for the living-wage employment and professional career paths. This combined programming could open the vast array of AmeriCorps State and National programs to Opportunity Youth thereby providing the longest, most diverse professional work experience and learning on-ramp for disconnect young people nationwide. An experience that not only gives them the intervention intensity and duration they need to reconnect, but also the validation of self that comes with service. The result is not only a pathway to reconnect thousands of Opportunity Youth annually, but to help them, through service, leverage their lived experience into transforming the very systems that had hitherto failed them in education, labor, social services, environment sectors.

Opportunity Pathways would operate as any other AmeriCorps State and National program. iFoster recommends a state-by-state focus to customize programming based on the specific needs of Opportunity Youth in each state and to align with existing state-specific programming and funding addressing at-risk youth. Further, the program would run off-cycle to ensure that Opportunity Youth recruited and trained from January through July would be ready to serve in programs come August/September.

5.1 OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS PROGRAM MODEL

While surveyed AmeriCorps programs are overwhelmingly supportive of adding Opportunity Youth as corps members, they identified several challenges (both current and anticipated).

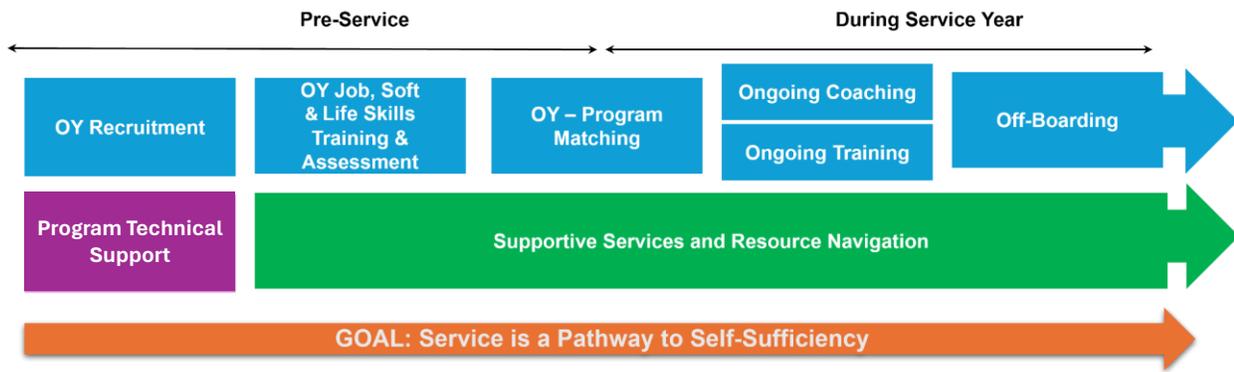
Figure 8. AmeriCorps Community Needs

Pre-Service Needs	During Service Needs	Post-Service Needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying and creating pipelines to recruit Opportunity Youth Building basic job skills and AmeriCorps readiness Support to secure housing for members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing member training: life skills, job/professional skills Ongoing life coaching and mental health supports Supportive services and resource navigation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Off-boarding preparation and pathways to permanent employment
Foundational Program Support		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional funding for living wage AmeriCorps living allowance and benefits Support to secure matching funds for program operations, especially additional staff Trauma-informed training for staff and host sites 		



While the challenge of recruiting, training, and retaining Opportunity Youth members is significant for AmeriCorps programs on their own, a state-focused approach to recruiting and preparing Opportunity Youth for service can build a viable recruitment pipeline. Building upon the Service Year Alliance toolkit, [Engaging Individuals After High School in Service Years](#), iFoster proposes a unique AmeriCorps program that builds the professional skills of Opportunity Youth, prepares them for service, and provides ongoing supports throughout their service year.

Figure 9. Opportunity Pathways Program Model



5.1.1 OPPORTUNITY YOUTH RECRUITMENT

A talent pipeline of Opportunity Youth candidates can be created by leveraging iFoster's and other AmeriCorps Opportunity Youth-focused program experience and partnerships in child welfare, juvenile justice, and Opportunity Youth networks. These have proven to be successful referral sources that enable AmeriCorps programs who engage Opportunity Youth as members to achieve their recruitment targets.

The child welfare system is mandated by the federal government to prepare young people to exit the foster care system with independent living plans and 90-day transition plans. These plans include employment and higher education goals, but rarely account for service as an option. Integrating AmeriCorps opportunities within the child welfare system would create a pipeline of prospects interested in not only tangible work experience and professional skills development, but in transforming their own communities and the systems they come from through service. Similar pipelines can be built within juvenile justice during probation transition. Likewise, enrollment in government benefits typically accessed by Opportunity Youth such as SNAP, FAFSA-Pell, and WIOA Opportunity Youth employment and development, can be recruiting points.

As iFoster currently does with its foster youth alumni, Opportunity Pathways alumni will form the core of recruitment campaigns. Anchored in a theme of service as a pathway to career, self-sufficiency and financial stability – recruitment can focus on empowering Opportunity Youth to build their skills and find value and confidence in themselves by becoming positive contributing members and change agents in their community.

5.1.2 OPPORTUNITY YOUTH PRE-SERVICE TRAINING

The term "pre-service training" is commonly used to describe the orientation AmeriCorps members receive upon enrollment. Programs report members need more skill building, sooner. Research shows that 65% of programs seek an avenue to develop basic skills for Opportunity Youth in the months *before* the first day of the term of service.

In this proposed model, Opportunity Pathways can upskill, stabilize and support Opportunity Youth prior to a term of AmeriCorps service. iFoster's existing AmeriCorps and jobs programming has been evaluated by the Administration for Children and Family Services, as a promising practice for foster youth employment. Incorporating this and other best practices from AmeriCorps programs with Opportunity Youth corps members, pre-service training would produce intensive development of workforce readiness and life skills. The program would meet Opportunity Youth where they are, provide both comprehensive cohort training and individual trainings as needed to scaffold youth the level or readiness required to successfully enter and fulfill an AmeriCorps State and National term of service.

Figure 10. Pre-Service Training Core Elements

Job Skills Core Elements	Soft Skills Core Elements	Life Skills Core Elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading and writing skills • Basic math • Computer and tech skills • Resume writing • Interviewing • Work discipline • Career interest / assessment • Career planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work enthusiasm and professionalism • Effective communication • Critical thinking • Conflict resolution • Customer service • Teamwork and collaboration • Cultural competency • Values in the workplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding your paycheck and budgeting • Finance 101 – credit, banking • Professional appearance • Home management • Contracts and agreements • Health and wellness (including food, nutrition, physical and mental health, stress/secondary trauma)

5.1.3 PROGRAM MATCHING

Upon successful completion of the pre-service training, Opportunity Youth graduates will be assessed to determine if they are ready for AmeriCorps service using a standard set of questions and scoring rubric. Two different service-readiness levels are envisioned:

- **Service Level 1:** where Opportunity Youth are ready to serve in entry-level, highly supported programs such as Hustle PHX, Imagine Justice, PowerCorps PHL, and iFoster TAY AmeriCorps, with the goal of gaining the professional skills they need to graduate to Service Level 2 programs, should they want to continue serving in AmeriCorps after their first year. It is anticipated that Opportunity Youth with limited to no work experience and system-impacted youth (i.e. foster, juvenile justice) may start in this level.
- **Service Level 2:** where Opportunity Youth are ready to serve in any AmeriCorps program and be deployed on host sites as equally productive service members as non-Opportunity Youth corps members.

If youth are deemed ready, they are matched to the optimal AmeriCorps program based on their skills, their job/career goals, cultural fit, background clearance (different programs have different background requirements), and proximity (unless there is a desire and ability to serve outside of their community). If they are not yet ready, youth are matched through local partners for short-term work experiences to gain more experience. Successful completion of these supportive work experiences results in being re-assessed and matched to AmeriCorps service opportunities.

5.1.4 ONGOING COACHING AND DEVELOPMENT DURING SERVICE

Throughout their service year, Opportunity Youth corps members will continue to improve their job skills, professional skills, and life skills through ongoing trainings from Opportunity Pathways. These trainings can either be delivered by individual programs that have received technical assistance and successfully completed train the trainer trainings, or they can participate in cohort trainings put on by Opportunity Pathways.

Training is designed to provide Opportunity Youth members with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to develop their professional skill set over the course of the service year. Trainings are trauma and evidence-informed, and incorporate strength-based principles, build team and cohort esprit de corps and are proven to ensure member retention throughout the program. Specific content includes:

1. Self-Efficacy and Leadership
2. Financial Literacy
3. Communications & Social / Professional Skills
4. Building Your Community Network
5. Life Skills and Self-Care
6. Education Planning and Career Exploration

Individual coaching to address specific needs is also available to address individual needs. Job coaching with trained trauma-informed coaches can address service performance issues or issues that arise at a host site service location such as timeliness, effective communication, handling critical feedback, and interacting on teams. Job coaches can also prepare individual youth for specific service tasks such as public speaking or presenting a workshop. Life coaching with clinical social workers can address the life issues that can become barriers to successful service completions such as managing through life changes (i.e. pregnancy, parenting, homelessness), crises (i.e. domestic violence, mental health), and therapy referrals.

Host site supervisors and program staff can refer youth to coaching. Also recommended is the creation of a member professional development plan and professional development goals for their service year based on their baseline evaluation against a standard rubric of basic job and soft skills and service-specific skills. Quarterly assessments of performance against this standard rubric will help inform coaching needs.



Figure 11. Example Basic Job and Soft Skills Performance Evaluation for OY Members

Basic Job and Soft Skills	Excellent	Average	Below Average	Focus Area
Work Ethic – consistently arrives on time, ready to work, and achieves daily service hours				
Attitude – maintains a positive, constructive, professional attitude				
Time Management – demonstrates time / priority management skills				
Professionalism – conducts themselves in a professional manner with clients and host				
Motivation – shows initiative and self-motivation				
Knowledge – demonstrates knowledge and skills to provide service effectively				
Performance – sets realistic goals and follows through on commitments				
Critical Thinking – appropriately builds knowledge, makes informed decisions, and seeks input and guidance				
Willingness to Learn – accepts responsibility for learning and performance				
Quality – demonstrates concern for the quality, accuracy, and completeness of tasks				
Dealing with Critical Feedback – accepts critical feedback & training, strives to improve				
Team work – works effectively with other staff, volunteers, and TAY AmeriCorps members				
Customer Service – demonstrates excellence in customer service				
Effective Communications – peer-to-peer client communications				
Effective Communications – team communications				
Effective Communications – communication with supervisor or other senior staff				
Electronic Communications – returns phone calls, emails and messages in a timely manner				
Electronic Communications – uses professional language when corresponding via email				
Telework – attends required zoom/distance meetings, participates fully and has camera on when requested				

5.1.5 OFF-BOARDING AND CONNECTION TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Off-boarding begins several months prior to the end of an Opportunity Youth member's service year. This includes review of individual performance evaluations and the development of an individual employment plan post-service. Career exploration, job search, resume writing, and interview preparation are core modules of off-boarding. Similar to in-service trainings, these trainings and workshops can be either provided by program staff or by Opportunity Pathways staff and members in a cohort model. Employment placement services are offered through supportive services.

5.1.6 PROGRAM TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Opportunity Pathways would prepare and support AmeriCorps State and National Programs to successfully engage and support the Opportunity Youth they receive throughout their service year. A train the trainer model could develop internal expertise and quickly expand the group of "experienced" programs nationwide. Two areas of development are envisioned: Opportunity Youth engagement competency, and Opportunity Youth program funding.

5.1.6.1 OPPORTUNITY YOUTH ENGAGEMENT COMPETENCY BUILDING

Technical assistance training will cover program readiness for Opportunity Youth members, train the trainer workshops so programs that wish to can develop in-house competencies in job, soft and life skills training for Opportunity Youth (and can be leveraged for all their members), trainer guides, self-directed trainings, and toolkits for its bootcamp basics training and its ongoing training modules. All trainings are anchored in trauma-informed practice and principles. iFoster envisions an ongoing series of training workshops for other AmeriCorps programs to have their staff and host sites attend prior to onboarding Opportunity Youth members and throughout the service year. In addition, suggested trainings lists can be provided from the existing suite of AmeriCorps self-directed trainings already available.

5.1.6.2 OPPORTUNITY YOUTH FUNDING EXPANSION

While AmeriCorps is increasing stipends to an effective \$13/hour wage and potentially minimizing match requirements, programs are still forecasted to be below what programs say they need to be sustainable. The reality that Opportunity Youth members may not be able to meet the expectations of host sites who pay a portion of an AmeriCorps member's stipend or contribute to the funding of an AmeriCorps program means that alternative funding must be available to support Opportunity Youth members in AmeriCorps.

However, there are other recurring federal funding streams that can help fund Opportunity Youth as members. iFoster and other Opportunity Youth member focused programs have experience in braiding and blending these funds to augment AmeriCorps investments. For example, lessons learned from the Performance

Partnership pilots (P3 pilots) and the continued inter-departmental collaboration that started with the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 which first provided authority to many departments including AmeriCorps (Corporation for National and Community Service) to braid federal funds and waive requirements for more effective service delivery, can facilitate the creation of a robust funding matrix. Key Opportunity Youth funding streams that can be combined include:

- WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) from Departments of Labor & Education where up to 80% of WIOA youth funds are targeted at OY job training and employment,
- SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) Employment & Training from Department of Agriculture which most recently supports work experience stipends, in addition to supportive services for work-focused education and employment training,
- Federal Pell Grants from Department of Education which supports college tuition of low income students,
- Chafee ETV from federal and state social services which supports post-secondary education and training for foster youth.

Figure 12. Funding Streams to Support OY Corps Members

Activity Supported	WIOA	SNAP E&T	PELL	CHAFEE ETV
Training	X	X		X
Work Experience Stipends/Pay	X	X		X
Services/Resources		X		X
Tuition and Fees	X	X	X	X
Intake and Assessment	X		X	X
Case Management / Counseling	X		X	X
Career Coaching & Job Search	X		X	X
Employment Placement Services	X		X	X

To address the funding gap necessary for a living-wage allowance and potential increases in program staff, Opportunity Pathways would build technical assistant trainings and toolkits on how programs can leverage multiple existing Opportunity Youth funding programs. State-specific modules for blending and waivers can be developed based on the specific Opportunity Youth funding opportunities in any given state or locality.

5.1.7 SUPPORTIVE SERVICES FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

Supportive services include: client case management, government benefits counseling and enrollment aid, job and life coaching, and resource navigation. Trauma-informed specialists with experience providing supportive

services to Opportunity Youth and system involved youth will ensure that throughout an Opportunity Youth’s engagement with AmeriCorps – either as a pre-service beneficiary of Opportunity Pathways or as a member of an AmeriCorps program – they have the supports they need to be successful.

iFoster proposes opening up its existing platform for referral and resource connection to Opportunity Pathways. This platform currently provides access to over \$260 Million worth of resources and services annually to foster youth and their caregivers nationwide and has been evaluated by the Administration for Children and Family Services as reducing family needs and improving caregiver and youth well-being. iFoster’s existing network of over 4,000 referral partners who support Opportunity Youth and specific subsets such as foster youth and justice involved youth can ensure a holistic approach to meeting youth needs. Opportunity Pathways staff and members would also provide ongoing local resource sourcing and due diligence to continue to broaden the pool of validated referral partners and ensure that warm hand-offs and escalation paths are in place to ensure that clients get the supports and services they need. Supportive services can be accessed throughout pre-service training and during a member’s term of service, as well as a transition-period post-service.

5.1.7.1 PRE-SERVICE SUPPORTS

During recruitment and pre-service training, the Opportunity Pathways supportive service team will check each Opportunity Youth’s employment barriers and ensure each youth has the concrete resources they need to be successful in their service year. A standard checklist of required resources is necessary before a graduating Opportunity Youth can be matched and placed with an AmeriCorps program for their service year.

Opportunity Pathways will work with a youth on a case-by-case basis to ensure the entire resource checklist is met, leveraging partnerships with local agencies who currently provide services to Opportunity Youth and funding streams that cover educational and work-related resource expenses. Based on experience serving transition-age foster youth, iFoster recommends required and optional checklist of resources to be in place to ensure youth have the stabilizing resources they need prior to the start of their service in AmeriCorps thus minimizing service disruptions and dropouts.

Figure 13. Pre-Service Concrete Resource Checklist

Required Concrete Resources	Optional / Additional Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing stability for at least 3-6 months • Enrolled in critical government benefits (i.e. SNAP) • Transportation access (public or personal) • Smartphone with monthly service plan • Right to work documents and gov’t ID • Clothing appropriate for service • Grooming/hygiene products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrolled in other government benefits as eligible • Debts / school fees management plan • Probation, legal requirements / expungements • Physical health supports • Mental health supports • Support networks • Laptop or other technology as needed • Childcare and parenting help

5.1.7.2 SUPPORTS DURING TERM OF SERVICE AND POST-SERVICE TRANSITION

Opportunity Pathways would provide the following roles and supportive services to Opportunity Youth throughout their term of service within both Service Level 1 and Service Level 2 programs. They would also provide transition services to facilitate post-service transitions into permanent employment and continuing education.

Figure 14. Key Opportunity Pathways Roles

Key Roles	Services Performed
Job Coach / Trainer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma-informed training in job skills, soft skills, professional skills, and basic life skills • Coaching in groups or individually to address specific skills development • Coaching through performance improvement plans
Supportive Services Specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs assessment • Resource navigation and connection • Aid completing resource applications • Following up to ensure clients got the resources or services they applied for • Periodic check in to see if client needs any further support
Government Benefits Counselor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government benefits counseling with understanding benefits available to Opportunity Youth, specific eligibility criteria including for sub-populations such as foster youth • Aid applying for and enrolling in government benefits • Aid in maintaining benefit status
Life Coach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aid in addressing life issues that can impact the ability to serve • Aid in goal setting and future planning (education/career plan) • Support for clients on performance improvement plans • Referrals to mental health therapy • Support in using AmeriCorps Member Assistance Program • Crisis support and referral

5.2 MODEL TO PRACTICE

Implementation of the Opportunity Pathways program is envisioned to be on a state-by-state basis to accommodate for state-specific Opportunity Youth crisis-level, specific Opportunity Youth needs and funding opportunities, and the participating AmeriCorps State and National Programs operating within the state. Implementation plans would identify Opportunity Youth needs, identify willing AmeriCorps programs, assess the readiness of willing programs to engage Opportunity Youth, determine funding opportunities to blend and programmatic waivers necessary for optimal blending/braiding of funds, and set Opportunity Youth recruitment targets. Recruitment plans would engage existing Opportunity Youth state/local systems and

agencies (i.e. state/county child welfare and probation, local WIOA agencies). Pre-service training would be localized to meet local Opportunity Youth needs. Willing AmeriCorps programs would be divided into Service Level 1 and Service Level 2 programs based on their readiness and ability to engage Opportunity Youth. Technical assistance training and supports would be localized to meet the needs of these willing programs. And a landscape analysis of local supportive services would be conducted and would augment the Opportunity Pathways resource navigation network.

CONCLUSION

As John Bridgeland and Tess Mason-Elder wrote for the White House Council on Community Solutions in 2012, they are rightly known as Opportunity Youth, “both because they are seeking opportunity and they present an opportunity to our nation if we invest in them.” iFoster and many others are proving that Opportunity Youth make great AmeriCorps members. Every day, these AmeriCorps members demonstrate that Opportunity Youth are resilient, emerging leaders, and an untapped resource for the nation and for AmeriCorps. This spirit of opportunity is exemplified by the 115 AmeriCorps grantee organizations who participated in this research project. Their willingness to combine forces, share resources and learn from each other is a beacon of hope, and a tremendous catalyst to launch a pilot effort. The path forward is clear - coordinated investments in key areas can build the systems for AmeriCorps programs to provide OY with transformational service opportunities.

Opportunity Youth can be incredible assets in their communities, when given opportunity, support, and respect. National service can serve as an “Opportunity Reboot” for a generation of young people out of school and work. With 68,000 different service opportunities each year, AmeriCorps is a remarkably agile and effective pathway into good paying jobs and successful futures.



Appendix: A

iFoster OY AmeriCorps Readiness Survey

AmeriCorps for All TAY Research Team Intro Survey

AmeriCorps has awarded iFoster a planning grant to re-imagine AmeriCorps as a pathway for youth as they transition out of the foster care system. This work calls for us to design pre- service and wrap-around supports (including additional funding) for AmeriCorps programs to recruit, train and support Transition Aged Foster Youth (TAY), aged 18-25.

iFoster is committed to the AmeriCorps Strategic Focus on creating opportunities for Opportunity Youth to serve. Opportunity Youth are between the ages of 16 and 24 and are neither in school nor working. The effects of this disconnection follow individuals for the rest of their lives, resulting in lower incomes, higher unemployment rates, and negative physical and mental health outcomes.

iFoster's TAY AmeriCorps program has consistently demonstrated that foster youth can be high-performing, dedicated members-- with the right supports.

Your responses are confidential. Quotes will not be attributed to individuals. We appreciate your insights and feedback.

This survey will document the readiness and needs of programs like yours to engage foster youth and Opportunity Youth as AmeriCorps members. Specifically, iFoster seeks your input on how we may best help your program with these potential resources:

- Pre-candidate training of youth so they are program ready
- Resources and supportive services throughout the service year
- Training and certification for programs on developing and supporting opportunity youth
- A permanent Resource and Case Management Hub for programs to plug into.

*Program Name

*Program Website

*AmeriCorps Focus Area

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advancing Racial Equity | <input type="checkbox"/> Capacity Building | <input type="checkbox"/> Economic Mobility/Opportunity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental Stewardship | <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy Futures/Public Health |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public Safety | <input type="checkbox"/> Rural Intermediaries | <input type="checkbox"/> Veterans and Military Families |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Workforce Pathways | | |

Other (Please specify)

*Do you engage Opportunity Youth as AmeriCorps members?

Yes

No

Not Sure

*Please estimate the number of members who are Opportunity Youth:

This is a feature of our program. (15% percent or more of the corps each year)

We do not recruit Opportunity Youth as members.

Other (Please specify)

*iFoster will work with AmeriCorps to pilot an effort to support programs that create pathways for Opportunity Youth.

If you were provided with additional resources, would you be willing to build your program’s capacity to engage Opportunity Youth as 10% or more of your AmeriCorps members?

Yes
 No
 Not Sure

What kind of supportive services and resources would your Program need to engage Opportunity Youth as Members? On a scale of 1-4, please rate your program’s need for iFoster’s support, with

- 4= Our program should be recognized nationally for this; no support needed.
- 3= We are confident we do this well, but we would benefit from more information.
- 2= There is room here for us to improve, and we would welcome training and technical assistance.
- 1= This is an area we must address to move forward with Foster Youth as Members, and we need support.

	Much support			No support	N/A
Providing basic job skills training with a focus on soft skill development prior to candidate being interviewed/selected by my program	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/>
Ensuring youth had their basic needs covered (food, housing, transportation, communications) prior to being interviewed/selected by my program	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/>
Additional funds to increase stipend so they could earn a living wage	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/>
Additional funds for programmatic infrastructure (staff, training, operations)	<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/>
Ongoing resource navigation support					

throughout term of service to connect youth to resources on an as needed basis

1 2 3 4

Ongoing member professional development and skills building throughout service year tied to my program needs

Ongoing case management support such as job and life coaches (including mental health) throughout term of service

1 2 3 4

Trauma-informed training for our staff with a focus on professional development of foster youth and opportunity youth

1 2 3 4

Training for our staff with a focus on professional development of foster youth and opportunity youth

1 2 3 4

If not, why not?

What is the average living allowance your Members receive? (Adjust for full-time if necessary.)

Would your program model need to change?

iFoster welcomes more detailed feedback and suggestions. Please add more detail if you wish.

Would you be willing to schedule a 30 minute call to discuss your program and your feedback in depth?
(Check box for Yes.)

First Name

Last Name

Phone

Email

APPENDIX B: PROGRAM PROFILES

Imagine Justice Project, Pierce County, Washington

Economic Opportunity for 20 youth in Tacoma.



[Imagine Justice Project](#) (IJP) connects and uplifts community-driven efforts to build safe and just futures for youth. Their vision for Pierce County is a vibrant, interwoven system of support that ensures all young people, especially those most vulnerable, are connected to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive. IJP engages [justice](#) involved youth as AmeriCorps members, serving a network of organizations across Pierce County. “Connect and uplift, those are our verbs,” reports Director Kaitlan Ohler. “We are creating a connection to caring adults, safe and supportive environments for youth that prevent and reduce contact with the criminal justice system. The psychological barriers don’t get enough attention. Our young people don’t grow up seeing themselves in helping roles, going to school and getting degrees and imagining themselves as a leader.”



“What makes AmeriCorps work for our young people? Making sure we have a high enough living allowance that we’re not exacerbating folks’ vulnerability financially. Soft skills has been really huge. We work with a program called Your Money Matters, which is like a local program that specifically is like youth mentoring around personal finance. So it’s like financial literacy plus financial mentoring. We provide more one on one case management.”

PowerCorpsPHL, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Immersive clean energy and green infrastructure service opportunities for 148 members.



For more than 10 years, [PowerCorpsPHL](#) has engaged nearly a thousand un- and under-employed 18-30 year-olds in workforce development training linked to living wage careers in green industries. “Opportunity youth make up a significant portion of our members,” PCPHL Director of Operations Matthew Woodruff reports. “Around half our members are court-involved and many receive ongoing support and advocacy from our Re-Entry services team.” PowerCorpsPHL works with partner organizations such as Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity around record expungements and “Know Your Rights” trainings. “PowerCorpsPHL is a robust opportunity for anyone who buys into the culture and follows through on the commitment. There is a clear pathway to a better situation in life and career opportunities.” PowerCorpsPHL invests in meeting members where they are and providing the educational, financial and social supports they need to thrive.

“Representation and lived experience matter in our staff hiring practices, and program alumni make up a quarter of our staff. Trauma informed mentoring is woven into our structure and processes.” PCPHL’s Supportive Services team supports participants in navigating barriers to successful program engagement and employment such as housing instability, childcare, mental well-being, and securing social benefits. To help navigate the issue of transportation to service sites around the city of Philadelphia, the organization provides monthly metro passes and supports members with getting their driver’s license. Matthew reports, “having learned many lessons from the recruitment challenges of the pandemic, our past few cohorts we have been successful in meeting our enrollment goals and maximizing opportunities for young people in Philly.”

At the same time the program maintains a high standard for members and sometimes has to dismiss participants if they aren’t able to meet the program’s standards overtime– “we value offering a rigorous workforce development program that holds industry-aligned expectations, even if that means the program not meeting a 100% successful completion rate. Working with opportunity youth and court-involved young people requires believing in the young person, the community, and the high-quality delivery of the program model, and being willing to extend the second chance or opportunity to someone looking to better themselves and their livelihood. Members don’t always make it through the program successfully on the first go around; we maintain an open-door policy that allows for individuals to return in future cohorts, believing that there is always opportunity for change and growth.”

Hustle PHX Youth Entrepreneurship Program, Phoenix, Arizona

Nine members creating entrepreneurship opportunities for themselves and others.



The purpose of Y.E.P. is to engage justice involved opportunity youth and equip them with tools that will allow them to take their business from the ideation phase to the execution of starting their business. “We found young people were becoming incarcerated at a very young age because of economic crimes,” Founder & CEO Oye Waddell reports. “We said, let’s start recruiting these young people, not just to serve them, but for them to serve. When the lightbulbs start clicking, and they see a different vision of themselves, and they get a different worldview of how they want their lives to move forward.”

“We listen to them,” says Demetrius Lester, Director of Youth Entrepreneurship. “Every Monday, we meet up to see how they’re showing up. They can serve with excellence because they feel seen. We allow people to have a voice. It’s about building relationships, servant leadership, walking alongside them.”

“Our members can do excellence because they feel listened to, they feel seen. And accountable,” Mr. Waddle says. “That’s our culture, we discuss it weekly with staff and AmeriCorps members: Be a Hustler. That’s Humility, being Unstoppable, being of Service, being a Team player, being a Learner, being Entrepreneurial and being Restored. Hustler culture. We invest in people, but they have to want to be invested in. And so members can work their way up to the maximum living allowance (\$32,000).”

Public Allies Indianapolis, Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center, Indiana

"Everyone leads" in this local affiliate of the national Public Allies program.



Public Allies Indianapolis is a program of the Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center (INRC), in partnership with Public Allies, a network of 12 Public Allies sites across the country. Public

Allies' goals are to build community leaders, strengthen nonprofits, and strengthen civic engagement. Begun in 2009, Public Allies Indianapolis is in its 15th program year.

Public Allies Indianapolis seeks to build a just and equitable society and the diverse leadership to sustain it. INRC recruits young people who come from diverse backgrounds educationally, socially, racially, and economically. There are three main program components: the nonprofit apprenticeship, training, and Team Service Projects (TSP). Allies serve at a nonprofit providing capacity-building support. Allies participate in weekly training sessions that focus on both hard and soft work and life skills. Through the TSP, Allies work with grassroots leaders to create and implement community service projects that reflect the assets and input of the neighborhood. To support Allies, INRC provides benefits, connections to resources, coaching and supervision.

Olga Mogollón reports, "Every program should have a Resource Coordinator. I support Allies to navigate challenging situations. I provide guides and documents for members to use to make their application processes go easier." Program Director Lauren Tolley agrees. "Olga puts in the work. She even goes to members' hearings if they are denied SNAP."

Lauren is blunt. "Our challenge is just getting people in the door. If they are willing to learn and willing to grow, we want them here. But it's tough. According to MIT's living wage calculator, a member should make at least \$16 per hour. That goes up to \$32 an hour with a child." While INRC raised the local living allowance to \$28,000, Lauren still sees a need to do more. "Some of our members need professional clothes, so we provide polos, gift cards and even set them up with Dress for Success. We have raised \$6,000 for an Emergency Fund to help members with grants and no-interest loans to help with heat, housing, tickets, the kind of costs that come up."

Community Health Pathways, Baltimore Corps, Maryland

80 Public Health AmeriCorps members fighting for access and equity.



For ten years, Baltimore Corps has been an engine of workforce development and local solutions, connecting Baltimore’s “underestimated talent to opportunity.” Their mission, to enlist talent to accelerate social innovation in Baltimore and advance a citywide agenda for equity and racial justice, makes them the talent pipeline for the City. “Service is not merely an act of kindness but necessary for collective rebellion, survival, and to thrive,” says Chief Program Officer Tamara Arnold. “Service is a method to connect, learn, strategize and implement together. Service is not ‘here’s what I can do for you,’ but ‘what can we achieve together?’”

Community Health Pathways was the first Public Health AmeriCorps program to launch, and the second cohort of 80 members started in March 2024. The model is unique, elevating the lived experience of community members and opportunity youth in the way others look for degrees and job experience. “Here at Baltimore Corps, we believe that talent is policy, and creating opportunity creates equity,” Tamara reports. The member roles (Community Resource Connector, Mental health Advocate, Violence Prevention Coordinator and Community Health Assistant) focus on healing-centered outreach, facing the community in ways traditional health systems do not.



Violence Prevention Coordinator, CHW

Implement trauma-informed care strategies, provide safety planning and follow-up services to violence-impacted individuals, and guide affected community members to support while working towards your CHW certification.



Community Health Assistant, CNA or CHW

Improve access and quality of care for underserved communities while training to become a certified nursing assistant (CNA) or community health worker (CHW). As a CNA, you’ll provide care for patients at homes, hospitals, and other facilities under the direction of a nurse. As a CHW, you’ll connect communities to vital health and social services.



Mental Health Advocate, Healing City

Use a healing-centered, trauma-informed approach to provide compassionate, culturally relevant peer support and help the community access wraparound services for community members navigating complex support systems.



Community Resource Connector, Healing City

Help community members access the resources and services they need to thrive by addressing social determinants of health. In this role, you may serve in a health, housing, financial opportunity or justice related organization.

Soft skill development starts during the recruitment phase. “We are responsible for all candidates, not just the ones we select,” says Nigel Garcia, Director of Strategic Engagement. “We work with all of them to find work.” Members receive bus passes, trauma-informed training, a living allowance of \$30,000, and many receive Certified Nursing Assistant or Community Health Worker certifications.

Appendix C: List of surveyed and interviewed programs

AFACTR-PATH AmeriCorps Program
Alpine Achievers Initiative
AmeriCorps Student Success
AmeriCorps Student Success Program
Asociación Pro Juventud
ASPIRE
Be Well Fox Valley AmeriCorps Program
Blueprint Schools Network
Boys & Girls Club of Manhattan
Bright Futures
Bur Oak Land Trust
CAC AmeriCorps
CA Foster Youth Initiative
CCAA Kids Count
CEDAM's AmeriCorps Program
Center for Family Life in Sunset Park
Center for Supportive Communities
Children's Beach House
Christian Appalachian Project AmeriCorps
City of Davenport AmeriCorps and Youth Corps Program
City of Dubuque AmeriCorps Program
City of Henderson AmeriCorps
City Service Corps
City Year New York
City Year Philadelphia
Cohanzick Climate Corps AmeriCorps
College Possible
Colorado Public Health Works
Common Threads Farm
Communities in Schools of Central Texas
Community Art Collaborative
Community Cares
Community Mediation Services Corps
Conservation Corps MN/IA
Dan River Year AmeriCorps
Early Childhood Teacher Corps
Early Learning Corps, Reading Corps, Math Corps, Corps for a Change
EASE
ECLIPSE
Environmental Conservation Corps
Environmental Justice Corps
Foster Parent Mentoring Program

Full Circle FarmCorps
Girl Scouts of Northern IL - Project Opportunity
Girl Scouts of Western Washington AmeriCorps Program
GO Fellowship
Habitat for Humanity AmeriCorps
Hands On Nashville AmeriCorps
Healthy Choices AmeriCorps
Homes for All
Homewood Children's Village AmeriCorps
Huron Pines AmeriCorps
Hustle PHX
Imagine Justice Project
Interfaith Enrichment Corps
Kansas Outdoor AmeriCorps Action Team
Kern Community Mentoring AmeriCorps
LISC AmeriCorps
Literacy AmeriCorps
Literacy First
Literacy Mid- South's LiteracyCorps
Miami University Service+
Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement
Missouri State Public Defender
MN Public Health Corps, MN Recovery Corps, MN Heading Home Corps and MN Climate Impact Corps
National Health Corps Philadelphia (Public Health Leadership)
Neighborhood Red Wolves Community Engagement Program
NEO Skill Corps
Next Steps AmeriCorps
NYC Peer Corps
Operation AmeriCorps City of Orlando
Our House
Overbrook AmeriCorps
OWL AmeriCorps Program
Pennsylvania Mountain Service Corps
PennServe Community Resource Navigators
PeoriaCorps
Pfeifer Camp AmeriCorps Program
Porter-Leath Generations AmeriCorps
PowerCorpsPHL
Public Allies Indianapolis
Racine Zoo AmeriCorps Program
Reading Partners

Refill Jackson Initiative
Riverways Education Partnerships
RurAL CAP VISTA Program
Safe Passages
SAME Justice
Schools of Hope AmeriCorps
SBP
Severson Dells Nature Center
Sitka AmeriCorps Program
Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers
Smart Start
Stanislaus State College Corps
Strengthen ND AmeriCorps
The DREAM Program
Thriving Utah
Trenton Climate Corps
Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity
UArizona Student Thinking Enrichment through Mathematics Mentors (STEMM)
UA Wildcat Corps
UCA BearsServe Leaders
United Way of Kaw Valley
Utah Healthcare Corps
Utah State University- Utah Conservation Corps
WAHRS - Wisconsin Association for Homeless and Runaway Services
Wichita State University
WYCO Public Health AmeriCorps
Youth Action Project Young Scholars
YouthBuild USA
Youth Connect AmeriCorps
Youth Villages AmeriCorps

