



EVIDENCE SNAPSHOT

AmeriCorps St. Louis Case Study



BUNDLED EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

Introduction

AmeriCorps St. Louis, headquartered in St. Louis, MO, was selected as one of the five programs to include as a case study for the AmeriCorps Climate Change Bundled Evaluation study given its focus on Disaster Response services both within Missouri and nationally (e.g., volunteer management and training, donations, and warehouse management). AmeriCorps St. Louis has received several state and national awards for their Disaster Response services. Most recently, they received the 2023 Outstanding Disaster Response Team Award from AmeriCorps (federal level). AmeriCorps St. Louis also works in the area of Environmental Stewardship through its work in conservation and wildfire response.

During a 2-day site visit in November 2023 to AmeriCorps St. Louis, researchers conducted individual interviews with

- 1 program director,
- 2 program staff, and
- 2 partner staff from 2 different organizations.

A focus group with seven current AmeriCorps St. Louis members was also held, comprising five members with at least 1 year of AmeriCorps service (inclusive of members that served terms with other AmeriCorps programs) and two members who more recently started their first year of AmeriCorps service. Throughout the visit, researchers observed AmeriCorps St. Louis training sessions, toured the facility, discussed daily program operations, and learned more about the tools AmeriCorps St. Louis uses to track and evaluate program outcomes. This case study primarily focuses on the program's activities within the area of Disaster Response to reflect the original purpose of including the program as a case study. However, it is important to note that the program and members also conduct many projects within the areas of Environmental Stewardship and Wildland Fire management and response, and as such, details of these activities are included throughout the case study to maintain a larger picture of the organization's goals and operating context.

Description of Program and Context

AmeriCorps St. Louis, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded in 1994 under the name Partnership for Youth Inc., provides training and development opportunities to AmeriCorps national service members through service on the Emergency Response Team (ERT). The primary focus of AmeriCorps St. Louis is hosting AmeriCorps members and therefore the nonprofit has only one program (versus being one of many programs within the organization). The ERT program has three areas of focus:

- Disaster Response,
- Environmental Stewardship, and
- Wildland Fire.

Members serve in all three areas. When AmeriCorps St. Louis is called for natural disasters and is able to respond, disaster missions become their first priority. During other times in the 11-month service term, members are serving on conservation projects (i.e., Environmental Stewardship and Wildland Fire). Program staff explained:

- *We have our primary function to serve as a rapid deployment team. So when we think about climate change, that really intersects within the areas of extreme weather events and how they can inflict damage on different communities. Our members will often be deployed as part of the short- or long-term response, and then transitioning to the recovery after a natural disaster, although it can also be manmade disasters as well.*
- *Year-round when there is not a deployment occurring, we do a lot of different habitat restoration and just Environmental Stewardship programs that I think either directly or indirectly can be connected to the climate and its effects on different ecological systems and everything like that. ... we do a lot of mitigation efforts around wildfire risk. So a lot of our Environmental Stewardship programs in the fall and into winter really look at how to decrease the potential negative impacts of wildfires by removing a lot of those fuels ahead of time through prescribed burning. So, it's really where the fire aspect comes in as our third focus area.*

AmeriCorps St. Louis only offers full-time member positions with one or two start times (i.e., enrollment is not rolling), with very few exceptions. Due to the nature of their service projects and the investment in training, staff shared it is difficult to include members who would require a less than full-time position. For example, the chainsaw and fire trainings are provided by partners between September and November. If a member were to miss these trainings, their field experience would be limited to only certain activities.



Services Performed

The following section describes the services provided by members. Members are usually deployed in teams of 6–8, which also includes a crew lead. For some Disaster Response deployments, teams may be much smaller (e.g., 2–3 members). Although not directly related to the AmeriCorps St. Louis climate change programming, members also volunteer at the shelter for the unhoused population located at AmeriCorps St. Louis.

Disaster Response

Given the unpredictability of natural disaster occurrence, AmeriCorps St. Louis members are deployed when the program receives a mission request from federal, state, and/or nonprofit organizations with concentrations in disaster relief. Upon AmeriCorps St. Louis determining they can accept the request, the program staff identifies members (often those who express interest in Disaster Response) to deploy to the community experiencing the disaster. Deployments typically last up to a month where members work for 6 days and receive 1 day off. To avoid member burnout, the program intentionally limits teams to 30 continuous days of service. If further support is needed within the community and funding is available, the program occasionally sends a replacement team of members to continue service.

The services that members provide during each disaster deployment vary depending upon the needs of the local communities and coordinated relief efforts. In light of the training that members receive, services often

include activities under the umbrella of Response and Recovery Support, such as donations management, volunteer management and training, shelter support, public information support, unified command support, case work and information referral, long-term recovery support, and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Voluntary Liaison Support. Members also provide Tactical Field Services in the community and buildings affected by the disaster (e.g., managing water within buildings and clearing debris, temporary roof repair, minor and emergency home repairs, fire fuels mitigation, hazard tree removal, health and wellness checks, and home assessments).

For example, two teams were sent to Hawaii in support of the 2023 wildfire response. One member shared:

We were focused on donations management ... we were sorting through raw donations making it so we could send to Maui what was actually useful for people to get, with the idea being that Maui is an island with finite space. So, if they outsource some of the sorting to a neighboring island, Maui could focus more on the donation side.

A member from the second team added:

We were set up in a warehouse to sort toiletries, kitchen and household items, baby stuff like that, more specific stuff ... we'd talk to survivors, get a list of things that they're hoping to get, and actually go do that. We call it shopping for them, so you're serving one-on-one with them. We'd see up to 300 people in a day between the teams that were there ... and it was California Conservation Corps and Minnesota, Iowa, and Montana Corps as well.

Describing the Disaster Response services, one program staff explained, "We're really coming in and filling a gap, until the recovery and response can get to a more stable place." Members conduct needs assessments, which include contacting lists of affected individuals to understand and document the primary needs of community members. This activity is vital to inform an equitable and coordinated response of Disaster Response organizations and yet many organizations are not able to prioritize the activity due to a lack of staffing or training. Through the service of members, AmeriCorps St. Louis supports the coordinating organizations (e.g., FEMA, State Emergency Management Agency [SEMA], and Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster [VOAD]) and, in turn, the community members in need by informing the response with the actual priorities of contacted community members affected by each disaster.

From a partner's perspective, members are willing to perform a variety of services, make sacrifices, and are dedicated:

They always want to take on the challenge, no matter what the challenge is, whether it's big or small. You know they don't see any job they're tasked with doing as unimportant. They are very enthusiastic about what they do, whether it's helping to set up a mass vaccination clinic, directing traffic at a mass vaccination clinic, cutting down trees, mucking, gutting a house, or removing drywall from a house. And they're young so they can work a lot of hours. And they don't mind sleeping on the floor of a church gymnasium and eating disaster food three meals a day. They just seem to really be committed to helping people.

Over the last 30 years, AmeriCorps St. Louis members have been deployed to respond to disasters in over 30 states and 65 of Missouri's 105 counties. Key deployments include the 2011 Joplin and Good Friday tornados, 2016 statewide flooding, 2019 Missouri and Mississippi River historic flooding, 2020 coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, and the July 2022 flooding in St. Louis.

Environmental Stewardship

For both Environmental Stewardship and Wildfire Response service projects, members are usually deployed for 5 days or, in some instances, 10-day periods. Teams for week-long projects depart on Monday mornings

and return Friday afternoons. For 10-day projects, teams depart on Monday and return the following Wednesday afternoon. Service project locations are often several hours from St. Louis. Members use company-owned vehicles to drive to the sites. They are provided with a small food allowance and the partner provides housing such as state park cabins.

Similar to the practices of other organizations with a focus on Environmental Stewardship, AmeriCorps St. Louis members primarily perform services within the categories of habitat restoration and invasive species management. Members, program staff, and a partner organization specifically focus activities on restoring a native habitat to Missouri, known as glades. Glades provide thin soiled grass and rock clearings in forests, allowing rare species to thrive. Members restore these habitats through clearing the canopy, environmental surveys, removing brush, planting activities, and restoring dams. Additionally, members frequently manage the challenge of invasive species by removing non-native species to natural environments and improving structures that are a frequent source of introducing non-native species (improper trail indication, trail building, and other maintenance programs).

Wildfire Response

To assist wildfire management, members conduct several activities to contribute to vital wildfire services. Primarily, members assist partner organizations through the construction of fire lines, which are dug to contain a burn within a specific area. Through the members' attention to detail, these lines are constructed with a focus on preserving the natural, native species within the area of a fire line and prescribed burn. Members also assist partner agencies with prescribed burns to remove invasive species, restore nutrients to the habitat, and manage forest health. Members frequently help partners ignite burns, maintain the fire line, and extinguish burns that encroach the fire line. Occasionally, government agencies request the assistance of members to respond to wildfires due to a lack of government personnel. During these projects, members use hand tools such as fire rakes and leaf blowers to lessen the spread of fire and monitor wildfires through fire towers.



Shelter Services

In a repurposed portion of the AmeriCorps St. Louis location, the program operates a shelter for the unhoused population of St. Louis. While not the primary focus area of members, the program allows members to opt in to volunteer with the shelter during Outreach Tuesday services and emergency winter warming periods. On outreach days, individuals have access to showers, meals, laundry, mail, and further referral to community resources. Additionally, in connection with the rise in extreme weather events facing St. Louis in the winter, the

City of St. Louis mobilizes AmeriCorps St. Louis to operate the shelter for 24 hours and provide emergency shelter on days when the temperature goes below 20 degrees.

Summarizing the values that AmeriCorps St. Louis staff and members embody and which inform their services are two mottos that were visible throughout the office (e.g., on the walls and print materials). One program staff explained:

One of our mottos is "See the need, meet the need." But one of the other areas we try to focus on, our more informal motto, is looking to assist what we call the "least served," "last served," or "never served." When we're providing our disaster services, we focus pretty much exclusively on populations that are at risk or have high vulnerability. So the under-insured, the uninsured, those that have health and safety risks in the home, those with children or elderly. We operate under the mindset that if people have resources and insurance and connections to recover, that's not our priority area. Our priority areas, especially if we have our own limited time and resources, should be on those that need further assistance in some way.

Role of Partners and Community Involvement

This section describes the role of partners in working with AmeriCorps St. Louis and broader community involvement.

Role of Partners

At the time of the site visit, AmeriCorps St. Louis reported partnerships with 22 organizations. For Disaster Response services, AmeriCorps St. Louis primarily partners with SEMA and VOAD to provide a coordinated response to disasters.

AmeriCorps St. Louis is designated as an AmeriCorps Disaster Response Team site (A-DRT, which is part of the AmeriCorps Disaster Services Unit [DSU]). Therefore, AmeriCorps St. Louis will receive mission requests from national disaster organizations such as FEMA to provide Disaster Response services. When assigned to a mission, AmeriCorps St. Louis enters into cooperative agreements with the DSU and funds are received from FEMA for services provided. Noting AmeriCorps St. Louis' dedication, a state partner said:

We've had a lot of little disasters that didn't receive individual assistance declarations through FEMA. That is when AmeriCorps really shows their worth because there is not going to be any money for these survivors to help move these trees off their houses or clean their basements that were flooded.

In the areas of Environmental Stewardship and Wildfire Management, AmeriCorps St. Louis partners with government agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and Missouri Department of Natural Resources, as well as local nonprofit organizations such as Great Rivers Greenway and Forest Park Forever. AmeriCorps St. Louis members complete "service projects" for these partner organizations. The projects are coordinated with the partners by AmeriCorps St. Louis program staff and service contracts are executed.

For more recent partnerships, program staff explained the efforts to ensure the partner's readiness to host members, including visits to build relationships, discussing feasible service projects, and identifying preliminary work to set the members and partner organizations up for a successful collaboration. The primary roles and responsibilities of partner organizations and their contacts are to oversee service program sites, introduce and provide initial supervision to member teams, complete member timesheets and paperwork, and as applicable, internally process payments to AmeriCorps St. Louis. Occasionally, partner organizations also provide task-specific trainings to members, as described later in the section focused on member training.

While members are on site performing service projects, the partners are providing ongoing learning opportunities. One program staff explained:

I think one thing that we very much try to emphasize in our partner relationships is that it is a two-way relationship. We are providing them with a service that they need to be met and they might not have the capacity to take care of on their own. But they are also providing a service for our members in that they are giving them practical hands-on experience. They're giving them networking opportunities and they're also engaging our members and taking the time ... to say not only what the program objectives are and the goals but say why those are the objectives and what the background is to understand why we will then ask members to perform specific tasks.

Community Involvement

Within its three areas of focus—Disaster Response, Environmental Stewardship, and Wildland Fire—nearly all interactions with the community are in Disaster Response services. However, the role of community is primarily as a direct or indirect recipient of services. Since communities are primarily a benefactor, additional information from the interviews is in the Community Outcomes section.

National Service Members

This section describes the member recruitment and selection processes, members' reasons for joining the program, and member demographics. Also included are perceptions about the stipend and training received.

Recruitment and Selection

AmeriCorps St. Louis' recruitment goal for an 11-month cycle is typically 40–42 members. During the most recent cycle, the program received 150 applications, eventually filling 42 member positions. Posting member positions on nontraditional job boards is one of the main strategies used by AmeriCorps St. Louis because of its ability to naturally filter applicants to those who may be an ideal fit for AmeriCorps positions, specifically for disaster and Environmental Stewardship activities. Users of these job boards are typically seeking nontraditional opportunities (i.e., not an office or desk space job) and would ideally have a mindset and/or experience that matches well with the member experience at AmeriCorps St. Louis. Although the use of social media and the program website has not netted as many applicants as other strategies, program staff view it as an important tool for raising program awareness.

Program staff and members alike frequently mentioned the success of recruitment through word-of-mouth among members and alumni. As a program that frequently deploys Disaster Response teams, members often encounter members from other AmeriCorps programs and similar organizations. During these interactions, members and staff reported conversations on their respective program opportunities and focus areas, acting as an opportunity to advocate for AmeriCorps St. Louis and their training and service activities as a future opportunity for skills development.

Program staff carefully review applications and select individuals who are deemed to have the best fit with the program's values and nature of the work. At the same time, attention is given to diversifying the membership. One program staff explained:

We really try to look at someone not so much for what their background or their education is, but really what the intent behind them wanting to join is. And if we feel like they meet that, their values and their ethic of service meets what we want, we want to try to remove any barriers that are there. So, whether that's financial or whatever it is.

Speaking to the demands of the services, especially as it pertains to the disaster deployments, program staff added that members have "to be really solid and stable and able to handle long days, able to handle stressful situations, and able to be very adaptable and flexible."

Additionally, to address issues of inequity and more effectively recruit members from the St. Louis community, the program is exploring the creation of a member position that remains in the St. Louis metro area. This idea was conceived from feedback that local community members may not be able to justify service in a program that often requires travel to remote locations each week. This reliance on travel in combination with the AmeriCorps stipend amount presents several inequitable barriers to local community members who may have family obligations restricting them from service requiring travel.

Why Members Join

When asked about their reasons for joining AmeriCorps St. Louis, the seven members participating in the focus group expressed their desires to serve additional AmeriCorps terms, explore career pathways, and gain experience in program focuses such as Disaster Response and wildfire response. The members were from states throughout the United States and none were from Missouri.

Three members joined AmeriCorps St. Louis for the program's training opportunities and service activities related to wildfire management. While the programs they previously served with included activities such as fire fuels management through the use of chainsaws, AmeriCorps St. Louis was perceived to be unique by the members for its ability to place members on service projects



that involve the construction of fire lines, assisting with prescribed burns, and assisting with wildfire response. Additionally, two members pursued service with AmeriCorps St. Louis due to the program's focus on Disaster Response, namely for the ability to assist communities in need and the potential to travel across the country on deployments.

Member Characteristics

Program staff said that the majority of AmeriCorps St. Louis members are within the 18 to 25 age group, approximately one-third have bachelor's degrees while most other members are either recent high school graduates or younger adults who have opted not to continue their education. The 2023–2024 ERT members include 26 percent identifying as Black, Indigenous or people of color—or BIPOC. Beyond demographics, the reported characteristics of AmeriCorps St. Louis members who were successful during their service focused on a strong work ethic and dedication to volunteering, preference for hands-on work, adaptability and comfort in the outdoors, and the ability to work with others.

Program staff and partners shared AmeriCorps St. Louis members' possessed passion, energy, enthusiasm, and commitment to the improvement of the environment and more specifically, understanding how AmeriCorps St. Louis aims to improve the environment. One partner described the members as "hard workers" and said they "have a great heart and are really enthusiastic and compassionate with individuals impacted by disasters.

Members participating in the focus group generally felt that the stipend (\$1,800/month before taxes) provided was enough to sustain themselves during their term due to the low cost of living in St. Louis. However, members noted several caveats surrounding equity to consider, with members clarifying that their ability to sustain themselves would not be attainable without additional resources and supports from program staff. Notably, the program provides members with instructional materials and support to apply and receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefits. The members explained that without these benefits, they would likely not be able to sustain their nutritional needs. Furthermore, while the members are able to meet their basic shelter and food needs, the stipend amount is not conducive to contributing to a savings account of any kind.

Unlike other AmeriCorps programs such as NCCC, AmeriCorps St. Louis does not provide housing for members when they are not on service deployments outside of St. Louis and thus members are responsible for housing. Given it is rare for AmeriCorps St. Louis members to be from St. Louis, the program makes efforts to connect with incoming members before their arrival to assist with housing arrangements. Members frequently "pass down" leases to other returning and incoming members and several members live together. However, some members experience difficulty in locating a lease that will accommodate an 11-month term.

Since the program did not provide a relocation fee for out-of-state members, focus group members agreed this was a significant challenge compounded by the need to wait for their first paycheck a month into service. The only method for overcoming this challenge involved drawing from their savings accounts, which may not be a reality for everyone interested in serving with AmeriCorps programs. Overall, members and program staff alike agree that increased stipends and additional program supports are vital to increasing the diversity of AmeriCorps programs and worthwhile for members and staff who are required to take on many responsibilities to ensure the program functions as planned.

Training

This section describes the training provided to members both through AmeriCorps St. Louis and partners. Additional professional development is provided to members who remain on as a fellow.

AmeriCorps St. Louis Training

Program staff provide training through a multi-staged approach. Prior to their service term, members complete the baseline AmeriCorps-required trainings through an online platform. At the beginning, program staff organize extensive training sessions during the first month of the member term. Training topics delivered during this period extend beyond the AmeriCorps required training to include prerequisite information in the primary areas of service projects such as emergency management basics, chainsaw maintenance, fire management basics, first aid, and CPR. Later in their term, members also receive in-depth training that spans 8 days at a state park to learn about personal protective equipment practices, starting and using chainsaws safely, and the complex skill of felling trees. Additionally, members attend an annual service trip in Montana to learn from the U.S. Forest Service and receive wildfire training (constructing and working in fire lines) with the opportunity to receive a federal certification called the Incident Qualification Card (also known as a Red Card), which is required to conduct any Wildland Fire work with the U.S. Forest Service.

During the first month of a member term and throughout the term, AmeriCorps St. Louis also provides training to develop and enhance the interpersonal skills of members with a focus on strengthening employability beyond their service, including topic areas such as giving and receiving constructive feedback, working within a team, diversity, equity, and inclusion training, and mental health management trainings. The first month of service baseline training is provided in many areas related to the member's service (e.g., chainsaw safety, tree felling). Program staff explained that the members oftentimes feel unsure of their ability to serve in environments that require skills they are more recently learning. To develop a member to be a more resilient learner, the program staff emphasize a culture of learning that acknowledges the inevitability of mistakes and embraces an attitude of learning from their mistakes. Program staff said:

We try to very much instill in our members critical thinking around why you're doing something and if you don't know why you're doing something, often the default is you should not be doing it. If you can't explain why you're doing something, you need to stop and evaluate and ask questions. So, really, trying to cultivate a learning environment where someone can say we're going to share our mistakes, we're going to share our lessons learned, and we're going to use knowledge as a way of empowering each other. And as a way of making sure our standards stay high and stay accountable.

Beyond the formal training provided, AmeriCorps St. Louis identifies and provides informal learning opportunities before, during, and after service projects. For example, before a project team is deployed on an environmental service project, teams receive task-specific training the Monday morning before they depart from AmeriCorps St. Louis. Additionally, members receive on-the-job training from partner organization staff and AmeriCorps St. Louis field supervisors when they accompany members on service projects. Members that serve as crew leads are members with at least one service term with AmeriCorps St. Louis or other AmeriCorps programs; crew lead members receive additional training from program staff to identify teachable moments in the field to continue to refine the initial training information members receive and contextualize lessons learned in a field setting. Program staff explained:

Throughout the term we try to avoid the mindset of, "Okay your training is done and now you have your service term." We want to incorporate trainings throughout the whole service term. It is making sure our team leads understand that part of their responsibility is looking for training moments in the field. So that you should be addressing whatever services—or performing whatever services—our partnering agencies are asking of us. But you're also balancing, you know, that work getting done with your member's development.



Following each service project, the teams come together as a full group to discuss the highs, lows, and areas for improvement for future projects. Through the establishment of a continuous improvement culture, members are encouraged to recommend additional trainings or resources in areas they want additional supports.

When asked about how sufficiently prepared they felt to perform service activities after their training, focus group members responding to the question reported that the information presented in trainings was sufficient to prepare them for service to the extent possible. The members added that the nature of services provided in disaster relief programs is highly dependent upon the individual characteristics of each deployment and thus requires tailored, on-the-job learning about aspects such as the terrain and geographical considerations, cultural best practices within the community, and even new activities within emergency management depending on the needs of each deployment. Despite the ever-changing skills and information needs of disaster service deployments, the members felt equipped to enter each disaster deployment due to their trainings on managing mental health and burnout, cultural awareness trainings so members are more aware of culture norms when providing disaster response services (e.g., Hawaii), emergency management basics, and comfort with being adaptable and supporting their fellow members.

Partner Training

Members also receive specialized training from partner organizations at the beginning of service terms and throughout their term as applicable. One partner explained their provision of fire ecology and invasive species training as an introductory discussion to the fundamental services of the agency and contextualized the expected services of members within the organization's goals. As applicable, the same partner provided programming during service days with poor weather, often leading discussions about ecological and safety topics of interest to the members. Furthermore, the members receive task-specific training from partner staff, which prepares them to provide quality service.

Additional Member Development

When possible, AmeriCorps St. Louis provides fellowships to members returning for a third or fourth term. Program staff and a participating fellow in the member focus group described the fellowship as a unique opportunity to operate largely individually in service to the program as an important form of training prior to the fellow's next step in their journey to education or employment. Currently, AmeriCorps St. Louis has one fellow.

The fellow is interested in furthering their wildfire response skills with AmeriCorps St. Louis. During the current term, AmeriCorps St. Louis has provided the fellow with one-on-one advanced training with the field staff supervisor on equipment maintenance and technology, placement in external advanced fire trainings, and leadership opportunities on member crews during the fire season. One program staff explained that this focused position allows the fellow to both explore their interest in a specified pathway to employment in conservation and gain access to valuable training and experience to advance their likelihood of obtaining employment with a relevant organization or agency. To demonstrate the wide variety of experience that the fellowship position can provide, the program director explained that a former fellow used their software development skills and created a database to streamline AmeriCorps St. Louis' ability to schedule service trips and track member activities and outcomes.

Outcomes

Details regarding the outcomes from AmeriCorps St. Louis services are provided in this section. The information is informed mainly from interviews with program staff, partner organizations, and the members themselves, obtained through the member focus group. This section concludes with the barriers and facilitators to meeting the expected outcomes of AmeriCorps St. Louis and by extension, the partner organizations and communities they serve.

Performance Measurement and Evaluation

When explaining the process of gathering data for measurement and evaluation, program staff focused on programs related to Disaster Response to explain the difficulties associated with measuring and evaluating activities to address disaster services. Due to the variance of natural disaster events (i.e., hurricanes, wildfires, tornadoes) and their impacts on the local environment, from a program standpoint, it is difficult to:

1. Determine the expected outputs for AmeriCorps grant requirements that will most likely align with the actual outputs of disasters (which are dependent on the type of disaster and evolving needs of each deployment) and
2. Develop systems to track the wide variety of activities that members may provide according to each deployment.

To address these difficulties, program staff developed a tracking system that uses a Google form that members complete at the end of each day of their disaster deployment. The form requires members to enter the types of services they completed; the estimated number of households assisted; the estimated number of individuals assisted; and qualitative information about their daily highlights, challenges, and interactions with partners to inform program staff of their daily activities.

Data from these daily submissions are then used to populate a tracking spreadsheet with information on all disaster deployments occurring during the 11-month term. The data informs federal and state grant reporting requirements. Staff are also able to compile all of the data and produce a master document summarizing all disaster services since the beginning of AmeriCorps St. Louis. Program staff use the aggregated data to develop a summary of services for the partner organizations. The partner summary report is accompanied by a feedback request survey in which the partners provide their input on what is working and where internal processes could be improved.

AmeriCorps St. Louis has a small evaluation contract (slightly more than \$15,000 across all 3 years of the grant period) with an external evaluator. The process and outcome evaluation draws upon data described above and also includes interviews with both Disaster Response and Environmental Stewardship partners.

Member Outcomes

As described previously, AmeriCorps St. Louis has a strong emphasis on continuous quality improvement. They have several processes and tools where data are collected while members are serving including After-Action Reviews, member self-evaluations, midyear check-in meetings, and exit interviews. In the future, AmeriCorps St. Louis hopes to bolster their existing surveys of alumni to learn more about concrete outcomes such as job attainment, however, they acknowledged the difficulty of this given staff capacity constraints. This section describes member outcomes in the areas of civic engagement, technical skills, and career preparation.

Civic Engagement

Both program staff and the members were asked about how AmeriCorps St. Louis improved members' civic engagement. One program staff shared that service with AmeriCorps St. Louis noticeably impacts the pursuit of individuals to address areas of concern that affect the public. Program staff went on to explain that AmeriCorps St. Louis has an extensive alumni network that overwhelmingly shares positive experiences from the program, whether they continued in the green jobs field or not. While program staff shared that it is difficult to draw a line directly from their service to what members may do in the future, the robust alumni network and sharing of positive member experiences exhibits that members feel they have made a contribution to the public in a way that is meaningful to them.

When asked about their relationship with civic engagement as a result of their experience with AmeriCorps, four of the seven members explicitly stated that they plan to continue volunteering in some fashion after their service term ends. Each member with these sentiments explained that they expect post-service volunteering will provide the opportunity to use skills acquired through service in conservation or disaster related efforts. One of the four members went on to add that their experience with AmeriCorps revealed the opportunity to explore their interests and grow their skillset through volunteering.

Technical Skills and Career Preparation

Important to AmeriCorps St. Louis is providing its members with the technical skills needed to pursue a career in a service area. Program staff said the training and certifications provided by AmeriCorps St. Louis set them apart from other organizations. For example, members have the opportunity to receive training from the U.S. Forest Service and eventually obtain their Red Card certification, which demonstrates an individual is qualified to perform tasks on a Wildland Fire incident. Other certificates AmeriCorps St. Louis members can earn include the following:

- First Aid/CPR
- Mental Health First Aid
- Wildland Firefighting
 - Missouri Level 1 Fire Training
 - S-212 Wildland Fire Chainsaws
 - S-130 Firefighter Training
 - S-190 Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior
 - L-180 Human Factors in the Wildland Fire Service)
- Disaster Response
 - IS-100 Introduction to ICS
 - IS-200 ICS for Single Resources and Initial Action Incidents
 - IS-700 National Incident Management System (NIMS), An Introduction
 - IS-800 National Response Framework, An Introduction

Returning members are also able to earn additional certificates including Wilderness First Aid and ICS-300, Intermediate ICS for Expanding Incidents.

Beyond providing members with a baseline understanding of information necessary to progress in the areas of conservation and emergency response, these certifications exhibit a valuable level of experience to future employers and also decrease the resources required to onboard the member as an employee. One program staff explained:

I think one of the things that we do that sets us apart as an organization, is our members receive a lot of training and, in particular, a lot of certifications that they need that future employers are looking at ... they'll look at our members when they leave here and they'll say, "Oh this person already has this cert that we would have to give them. And now they have their Red Card or now they have [U.S. Fire Administration Incident Command System] ICS300 and higher level ICS course taken care of. And I don't need to worry about devoting time and resources to getting this person through this process." I think it provides our members with not only a good baseline understanding of a lot of these different areas for

future career opportunities but also a lot of the actual certifications that they either will need as a [prerequisite] for a job, or they will need to get when they have that job.

One program staff added that their trainings are bolstered by training and experience that occurs in the field, explaining that these service activities often expose members to a variety of skills heavily used in conservation and Disaster Response fields. They went on to explain that the field experiences often motivate members to pursue a career related to their service area. Program staff shared that four members from a previous cycle are employed with the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

Three of the seven members who participated in the focus group shared that following their service term they wanted to pursue a career in a related field. One member shared that the training and technical skills of the program were vital to their decision to pursue a green job, noting that training and activities associated with the chainsaw certifications, Red Card, and Wilderness First Aid certification provided a clear idea of what the pathway to a green job would entail in terms of external certifications, additional experience, and characteristics that would suit a career in the green jobs field. Two members shared this sentiment and went on to explain the value of networking during their service when deciding to pursue a green jobs pathway. One of these members stated that the



contacts from partner organizations and program staff are eager to share their knowledge of their career field and support the member in their future endeavors, often through the form of pursuing certification opportunities or serving as trusted references for members during their job search. The other member who described the importance of networking went on to share the value of continued support from partner contacts, noting that staff from a partner organization shared their contact information with the member to maintain a relationship if they were interested in pursuing a position in Wildland Fire. The member summarized the value of their member experience in the field, stating:

You spend so much time with them [partners] over the course of a week or 2 weeks that you just connect on a deeper level and you can form relationships for the rest of your life that might make a really big difference, even if it's just a recommendation letter.

Community Outcomes

In describing their involvement with the communities they serve, one member described this through a direct and indirect service distinction. The member explained that direct service with members of the community can often be entirely focused on obtaining necessary goods (resource kits) or performing physical services (clearing debris), which reduces the burden on the community member experiencing fallout from a disaster. The member's perception of indirect service for community members included the conversations they had in their exchanges as an opportunity to inform the community of available resources, and vitally, recognize the increased severity and occurrence of natural disasters as a result of climate change. Another member continued this explanation of community involvement, stating that these interactions with members of the community are essential to providing them with necessary physical resources and bringing about awareness of climate change happening in their community rather than the global, abstract challenge to which it can often be restricted.

Through their Disaster Response deployments, program staff discussed several practices and lessons learned when engaging with diverse communities. Program staff explained that in natural disaster events, communities may have a distrust of federal organizations such as FEMA. To overcome these associations and assure community members of their intentions, one program staff said that conversations with community members to explain the program's goals and offered services are important. During these conversations with community members, individuals often become more comfortable with AmeriCorps St. Louis, identify neighbors who may need help, and occasionally provide contact information for community members who are in need. Program staff also said churches in the community are beneficial to identifying community members in need and coordinating with other organizations providing relief.

While the members did not explicitly discuss community outcomes as a result of their service on disaster deployments, the estimated impact of members was culled through AmeriCorps St. Louis' History of Disaster Deployments document (note that these metrics include the services of members not present for the focus group). During the month-long deployment to Kahului, HI, to assist with recovery from the 2023 Maui wildfires, two of the participating members contributed to the following outputs as part of their impact on the community: estimated 593 households assisted; estimated 2,967 individuals assisted; 90,706 pounds of food collected, sorted, distributed; 9,050 pounds of clothing collected, sorted, distributed; 14,860 pounds of other supplies collected, sorted, distributed; 701 pounds of donations sorted; 72 volunteers registered; 152 volunteers supervised; and 478 volunteer hours leveraged.

AmeriCorps St. Louis staff and a partner representing an organization focused on Environmental Stewardship said the way the services provided by the members impacted community outcomes was through assisting the partners in cost-effectively achieving their targets. From the partner's perspective, having members complete services such as invasive species management, habitat restoration projects, and Wildland Fire line construction at a quality level allows the government agency to divert limited staff resources and budget to activities that necessitate the education and experience of hired and contracted partner staff.

Barriers to Meeting Intended Outcomes

The most pressing barriers to the program relate to staff capacity and available funding, especially considering the high operating costs of Disaster Response organizations and Environmental Stewardship activities of AmeriCorps St. Louis. Namely, due to AmeriCorps St. Louis' dedication to member development, the program's Environmental Stewardship focus area heavily features the use of chainsaws and thus carries associated high costs of workman's compensation insurance, equipment, equipment maintenance, and fuel in addition to vehicle and food costs.

On top of these high-cost burdens, AmeriCorps St. Louis is also required to front costs for Disaster Response deployments and is only reimbursed if the mission is declared a federally recognized disaster. The program is required to front the funds to reserve housing and provide a food budget for the member teams to stay and serve at the disaster site. Disregarding the financial difficulties this imposes on the program when the disaster is not federally recognized and thus reimbursed, disasters that are federally recognized require time to process and approve reimbursement requests. This time associated with processing reimbursement from the federal government can sometimes take up to several months, causing the program to hold the financial burden of these expenses for longer than feasible.

In recognition of these barriers, program leadership is in the process of identifying additional funding streams to build cash reserves if they need to incur expenses and strengthen the capacity of program staff through the creation of more positions so staff don't have to "wear so many hats."

Facilitators to Meeting Intended Outcomes

A theme that is consistent throughout the case study is AmeriCorps St. Louis staff's dedication and priority of advancing member development which, in turn, drives many of the facilitators to meet the program goals and outcomes. It is noteworthy that five of the eight staff members are AmeriCorps St. Louis alumni. One of the interviewed staff members explained their reason for staying was because AmeriCorps St. Louis had a culture that supported ongoing learning for both members and staff.

The commitment to learning and service facilitates the program being known for its safety standards, procedures, and training opportunities, which contribute to member development and the ability of the organization to effectively expand the capacity of its partner organizations. One member shared their reason to continue a second year of service with AmeriCorps St. Louis and their belief that the program was effective was due to the staff's prioritization of the member experience in their program services and its focus on developing the members, regardless of their intended career path. One member shared that the program staff have open and candid conversations with them about the hopes, learning interests, and service preferences of each member, with the ultimate goal of tailoring the service activities to align with member preferences to the extent possible. The member went on to explain that centering the member experience was instrumental in their decision to pursue another year of service with the organization and to continue to enthusiastically contribute to the missions and goals of AmeriCorps St. Louis.

Through AmeriCorps St. Louis' dedication to building a culture of learning and continuous development, partner and program staff responses indicate that this focus may attract or develop members with a positive and enthusiastic attitude that is necessary to meet the program outcomes. Specifically, one partner shared the members' abilities to take on any task during a disaster deployment regardless of "how dirty or how hard it is" as invaluable to meeting the needs of a community, noting, "I've seen them do it all." Program staff shared similar sentiments regarding the importance of member attitudes in meeting intended outcomes of the overall program, and more specifically, the goals of each service program, noting:

What first comes to mind is the ability to leverage a lot of energy, enthusiasm, and commitment that our members have. And focus or channel that energy and commitment and enthusiasm towards areas that require some sort of service. ... I think one of the things that has always struck me about our members and our organization is that we can get a lot of work done or service done very quickly. Whether it's just a team of five or the whole corps, you throw them at it [and] assuming they have direction and oversight, they can move very quickly and very thoroughly and want to do a good job and get it done very well. The impact is obvious from having them there.



Closing

The mission of AmeriCorps St. Louis is "to enhance the professional skills and lifelong service ethic of those who serve; to respond to critical unmet needs in the areas of emergency response and environmental conservation; to leverage service of volunteers; and to build the capacity for our partnering agencies and communities we serve."

Through the 2-day site visit and analysis of member, program staff and director, and partner interview responses, it is apparent that the program is dedicated to achieving its mission of developing the skills and service ethic of the AmeriCorps St. Louis member. Aside from the many training offerings, certification pathways, and professional development opportunities AmeriCorps St. Louis organizes, program staff and members alike contribute to a strong culture that emphasizes lifelong learning. Whether members are serving in the field on disaster deployment or partner-supervised Environmental Stewardship service projects, it is evident that members largely feel supported to pursue their goals during and beyond their service term with AmeriCorps St. Louis.

The program aims to achieve its focus on supporting member development through several avenues, such as predetermined training days each month, weekly After-Action Reviews, networking events with green career professionals, individual goal setting, routine feedback surveys, and midyear reviews. The outcomes of these activities are reflected in the following quote from a member choosing to stay for a second term:

Why I decided to stay This goes back to why the program is effective. Our staff are really hardworking and genuinely care about us and want us to develop as people and people in

this career path That is something you don't always get. That is why I was inclined to stay another year You feel like your voice is heard.

The investment and focus on member development seemingly contributes to the outcomes of not only members themselves but also the missions of their partner organizations and thereby the outcomes of the communities they serve. Aside from their ability to act as “force multipliers” for the partners (i.e., expand the ability to make a greater impact) and provide services at a feasible rate, members impact the communities they serve (according to the partners) through their willingness to take on any task regardless of how challenging or seemingly unimportant it appears. When thinking about communities recovering from disaster, this is a vital quality to ensure that the community members are receiving the services they require in a coordinated, effective fashion. Moving forward, AmeriCorps St. Louis aims to strengthen the services they provide by locating additional funding streams to bolster staff capacity and continue their responsive approach to member development.

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About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. Learn more at [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov).

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The [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation](https://www.americorps.gov/office-of-research-and-evaluation) assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America.

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