

AmeriCorps Impact Webinar Transcript

Results Driven Service: 2023 State of the Evidence

Mary M. Hyde:

Can you talk a little bit about lifting up and reaching underserved communities?

Jacob Saamba:

We're this intervention that makes them stronger, better, more effective people are more healthy, people are more resilient. To me, focusing on that end outcome is so important to celebrate, and I think evidence becomes a strong part of that. Data performance becomes a strong part of that because we are better at what we do. We're better at highlighting to future and current community partners what they can do.

Andrea Gibbons:

By having better data, it not only lets us measure our outcomes to different communities, but it also helps us target and know where we need to better serve underserved communities.

David Medina:

There are two important parts of making sure that evidence-based policymaking is equitable. The first, from our perspective is defining and prioritizing evidence in grant programs so that when you're evaluating grant applications you're looking at the research and data and evidence behind those proposed interventions. The second part of that whole evidence-based policymaking process is investing in evaluations.

You here at AmeriCorps for the last several years have invested at least 1% of your program dollars in evaluations. We know that you've been focusing those evaluations on nonprofits and communities that haven't had the resources for those evaluations in the past. Communities, in many cases, minority communities, by investing in those evaluations to build the evidence in communities all across the country and then prioritizing evidence in the grant making process, you're ensuring equity on both ends.

Andrea Gibbons:

I think we're on that road to make the changes in our culture and also to really unleash the value of our data. We are a very data rich organization and if we can share more of that data, it will allow organizations and people to reuse it and to really help prove our value.

Sonali Nijhawan:

We're really lucky because our grant making happens on a national level, but also happens at state levels. So there's place for innovation and place for folks to be responsive to their communities.

Jennifer Bastress Tahmasebi:

I would like to continue to think about how we provide equity related to models and really start to spotlight certain models and drive our funding towards that as a way to focus our impact and also provide additional stronger technical assistance around certain program models. I would also be very

interested in looking at some of our longstanding grantees that have a specific model that may have not changed for 20 years, in creating the space for them to try out new implementation and research that.

Michael D. Smith:

We're coming up on the 30th anniversary of AmeriCorps. They don't think about the actual transformative impact that it's having on poverty, on jobs, on hunger, on homelessness, and so we have a responsibility to make sure that we are proving and improving the work that we're doing. We are embedded in the community. We are a part of the community. It's pretty easy for us to work with our state commissions, to work with our partners, to work with our grantees, to work with their community councils, to work with their beneficiaries. We are already there. We are part of the community, so we don't have to work hard to do that.

Katy Hussey-Stoniker:

Welcome to Results Driven Service, the 2023 state of the evidence on AmeriCorps impact. My name is Katy Hussey-Stoniker and I'm the Learning Officer for the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation. Today's webinar is a celebration, a celebration of AmeriCorps' 30th anniversary and the state of our evidence. Our objective today is to share the framework built and the synthesize results that instruct our understanding of our impact, of our evidence building and research activities, and inform our decision-making processes. We'll also take a few reflective moments focused on how AmeriCorps makes a difference in the lives of individuals and communities through transforming federal resources into actionable problem solving for good. Next slide.

The Office of Research and Evaluation's mission is fourfold. We identify national service and volunteer trends, conduct research and build scholarship on civic engagement, measure national service impact, and promote evidence-based models and program expansion. We're excited to share the 2023 state of the evidence report that highlights a compendium of evaluation and research from all four of our mission directives. More importantly, the report identifies and accounts for our existing evidence, provides a framework for understanding the evidence and results, and is a wonderful tool to learn, improve, and communicate the valuable work of our agency and partners.

This webinar will present our current evidence base and we've also invited special guest presenters to reflect, provide experiential context and narrative to the evidence built, and yes, celebrate AmeriCorps' 30th year anniversary. The session will be packed, so we're encouraging participants to place questions in the chat that will be compiled and answered in a follow-up Q and A document posted with the webinar recording, slide deck, and resources. Please be sure to place questions and comments you might have in the chat throughout the webinar. Next slide.

Our CEO would hope to be here today to celebrate in person, the release of the state of the evidence report that shows that through AmeriCorps' investment in national service and volunteering, we're improving the lives of our members, our partners, our communities, and our country. Unfortunately, an unanticipated scheduling conflict arose. He wanted to make sure though that we kicked off our celebration with a message that underscores how proud he is of our evidence, supporting the transformative impact of AmeriCorps, and continues to have an impact on so many lives. Now a message celebrating AmeriCorps evidence from Michael Smith, CEO. Next slide.

Michael D. Smith:

Hello, everybody. We often talk about AmeriCorps being a force multiplier and having a triple bottom line. That means AmeriCorps is good for organizations, it's good for members and volunteers and it's good for the community, but we don't often talk about how we know it's good. It's our research and of

course our research team and partners. This year we are celebrating AmeriCorps' 30th anniversary, and for three decades, AmeriCorps has been leading with evidence.

Evidence-based research gives us the tools that we need to identify promising local solutions and to apply what works in other areas. Together we work alongside our community members and partners who have their eyes, their ears, and their hearts on the ground. This is just one of the many reasons why building a platform of research and evidence is important because it gives us the tools to demonstrate that service isn't just a nice to have. It's a critical part of a healthy, thriving democracy.

Our 2023 state of the evidence report confirms and reinforces what we've seen over the last 30 years. Through AmeriCorps' investment in national service and volunteering, we are improving the lives of our members, our partners, our local communities, and our country. Among many key findings in the report indicate that AmeriCorps members build the necessary cultural competency to work and interact with people who are different from themselves.

AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers experience improved physical and psychological wellbeing due to their service experience, and AmeriCorps partnerships can help grantees meet their project goals. AmeriCorps can be a life-changing experience for those who serve, delivering new skills and experiences, and helping with workforce pathways by opening doors to education and diverse career paths.

Our research also shows that AmeriCorps helps create citizens who are more engaged in their community and more likely to vote. In fact, 86% of exiting members feel a personal obligation to contribute to their communities after their service year ends. So together we are creating new generations of civic leaders for our country. So in the coming years, what we're going to do is we're going to continue to focus our research on member and volunteer impact, and we're going to better understand what it means to create a meaningful service experience because we know that AmeriCorps really does bring out the best in America.

Scott Richman:

My name is Scott Richman and I'm excited to be a part of today's webinar and discuss the 2023 State of the Evidence report that Mathematica prepared for AmeriCorps as part of the building a Culture of organizational learning project. I'm just one person of a larger team, so I also want to acknowledge Michelle Bennett and Katie Gleason who are co-authors on this report, as well as Susan Lopez who directs the larger project for Mathematica. Next slide please.

So I'm going to start off by providing an overview of the 2023 State of the Evidence report, including how we carried out the evidence review using a framework we developed for the effort. I'm going to provide a summary of key themes that emerge from the body of evidence we reviewed, and I'll be focusing on the four main areas where the agency seeks to make an impact, which is at the individual, organization, local community, and societal levels. As I highlight key findings from each of these areas, you'll hear reflections from AmeriCorps staff, alumni and grantees along with Results for America, where they'll share their insights on how the agency builds evidence to support and enhance national service and civic engagement. Next slide.

So guided by its learning agenda, AmeriCorps generates and uses an incredible amount of evidence to inform how the agency operates and improves upon its effectiveness. Using evidence in this way helps the agency enhance its impact on national service members and volunteers, partner organizations, and the communities they serve. In order to do this, AmeriCorps prioritizes and regularly invests in building evidence. As part of a larger ecosystem, the agency, along with state service commissions provide funding and technical support to AmeriCorps state and national grantees to conduct independent evaluations of their interventions.

Programs such as AmeriCorps NCCC, AmeriCorps Vista and AmeriCorps Seniors also generate evidence that align to the agency's learning agenda. The AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation is another primary source of the evidence that the agency generates. ORE regularly conducts its own research, while also funding third party evaluations to generate relevant evidence on AmeriCorps programs, successful interventions, and civic life in the United States. ORE has also funded four research grant cycles between 2015 and 2022 that support researchers and scholars at higher education institutions to study civic engagement, volunteerism, and national service.

So overall, the agency produces a high volume of evidence from these various sources, and this creates a critical need to periodically bring together and review all this evidence to help identify themes, strengths and limitations in the evidence base. This can help advance the field's knowledge base around national service and civic engagement, and also inform how AmeriCorps goes about its planning efforts and identify where more evidence is needed. Next slide.

So back in 2017, AmeriCorps ORE took the step of conducting a large scale evidence synthesis and created the 2017 state of the evidence report. This report synthesized results from research and evaluation activities conducted between October 2014 to June 2017. The report identified a variety of key findings about the state of the evidence at the time, and I've highlighted a few of those findings here in the slide and we'll actually hear about some of these areas when we're discussing the 2023 findings.

So the 2017 report noted how volunteerism and AmeriCorps service can benefit individuals economic opportunity by increasing the odds of finding employment. The report also highlighted how Americans who volunteer, older Americans who volunteer can experience health improvements such as by studying how those who volunteered were more likely to report being in good health than those that did not volunteer. Finally, the report discussed how AmeriCorps funded interventions provide a return on taxpayer investment as several studies demonstrated the cost savings associated with AmeriCorps funded interventions. Next slide.

So all of this helped set the stage for this new 2023 State of the Evidence report. The purpose of this report was to synthesize the evidence that AmeriCorps has helped build since the 2017 report to further advance the knowledge base on national service, volunteerism, and civic engagement. To help guide how we reviewed and synthesize this evidence, Mathematica worked collaboratively with AmeriCorps ORE to develop what we call the State of the Evidence Framework. So this framework consists of four domains that help define where the agency seeks to build evidence in pursuit of its mission to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. Next slide.

So here is what the framework looks like and the four domains it includes. So one domain is AmeriCorps participants, and these are the individuals who join AmeriCorps as members or volunteers to serve local communities through AmeriCorps programs. Then there are the AmeriCorps partners, and these are the grantees and sponsoring organizations that use AmeriCorps funding to implement service projects in their local areas. The next domain is communities, and we define this domain as the individuals, groups, and local areas that experience services from AmeriCorps funded partners delivered by AmeriCorps members and volunteers. Then finally, we have the society domain, which pertains to national service, volunteering and civic engagement in the United States. Our report uses this framework as a foundation for identifying what new knowledge has been generated in these key areas. Next slide.

So the evidence review we conducted includes studies published between July 2017 and December 2022. Our goal essentially was to pick up where the 2017 report left off with regards to new evidence that was generated since the time of that report. The studies we reviewed were produced by a variety of sources. This include AmeriCorps program grantees, AmeriCorps ORE itself, along with the research grantees and external contractors that AmeriCorps ORE funds.

To be included in the review, studies needed to have met at least one of the following criteria. Studies could have had AmeriCorps participants as the focus of the research such as characterizing who AmeriCorps participants are or the benefits they experience. Studies could have focused on assessing AmeriCorps funded interventions where AmeriCorps participants were involved in delivering services that AmeriCorps partners provided to communities. Finally, studies could have also broadly been focused on advancing the field's knowledge base about national service, volunteerism or civic engagement. Next slide.

So to conduct our evidence review, we first compiled studies from the AmeriCorps Evidence Exchange and the AmeriCorps ORE research grantee profiles, and we also received some studies directly from AmeriCorps ORE. In total we reviewed 116 studies for the report. To carry out the review, we extracted information on each study's subset of focus, including the relevant AmeriCorps focus area and topic areas. We gathered information on the interventions that were examined along with the intended focal populations. We also quoted studies by their research design or the approach that the research used and also documented the studies outcomes of interest and the main findings for each of the studies. Next slide.

So to give you a brief sense of the studies that we reviewed, nearly half of the studies were produced by AmeriCorps program grantee evaluators. AmeriCorps ORE research grantees and reports commissioned by AmeriCorps ORE were the next most common types. We also found that nearly two-thirds of the studies focused on the community domain of the state of the evidence framework. Then AmeriCorps participants and AmeriCorps partners these domains had relatively the fewest number of studies where they were the main focus. Next slide.

In terms of the study designs, 43% of the studies that we reviewed used a randomized control trial or a quasi experimental design, which are approaches that can help researchers draw causal conclusions about the study findings. Beyond that, we saw a variety of other research designs and approaches to the studies we reviewed, which generally aligns with how AmeriCorps seeks to work with grantees wherever they are in their evidence building journey. Next slide.

So to synthesize the evidence we reviewed, we look to identify emerging themes for each domain in the State of the Evidence framework. We placed greater weight on findings from impact studies where causal conclusions could be made. Then we discussed themes emerging from other study types where the findings hung together or they were in relation to findings discussed in other impact studies. For today's presentation, I'm only going to highlight a few key findings from each of the domains, but there's certainly a lot more in the report than what I'll discuss today.

Before diving into the findings themselves, I just want to emphasize that the purpose of this report is to capture the state of the evidence during a specific timeframe. We're taking a snapshot of the evidence at a particular moment of time and then taking a look at what we see in that picture. So this means that the report isn't cumulative and it doesn't include evidence that was built before the timeframe we're focusing on. At the same time, AmeriCorps continues to build evidence. So this means that our interpretation of the evidence as it exists today can certainly evolve as new evidence emerges. Next slide, please.

All right. With that, now I'm going to discuss the State of the Evidence on AmeriCorps participants. Next slide please. All right, so at its core, AmeriCorps is an agency that empowers individuals to help address local community challenges, but that national service experience can also impact AmeriCorps participants themselves. So in reviewing the evidence on AmeriCorps participants, we sought to address two main research questions. One, what are the characteristics of participants who serve with AmeriCorps, and then what outcomes or impacts, if any, do AmeriCorps participants experience? During

our review, we identified 16 studies that had a focus on AmeriCorps participants, and I'm going to highlight a few key findings from the report. Next slide.

So our review identified three studies that primarily focused on describing characteristics of AmeriCorps participants. One study was an analysis of the AmeriCorps member exit survey, which captures information about member service experiences and attitudes upon exiting their program. The study found that AmeriCorps members possessed the cultural competency to work with communities of people who are different from themselves. For example, the vast majority of AmeriCorps members reported that they enjoy exploring differences with and respect the values of people from different cultures and backgrounds.

Another study conducted by an AmeriCorps ORE research grantee sought to use data from the AmeriCorps longitudinal study to develop profiles based on AmeriCorps members backgrounds and motivations to serve. Using a cluster analysis, the study found four distinct member profiles, what they call the Young Idealists, Wanderers, Gappers, and Public Servants, and created these profiles based on members' age, education, and motivation to serve using measures of civic awareness and commitment to public interest. So as a group, these studies help provide a deeper understanding of who AmeriCorps members are as they enter and exit their service term. Next slide.

With regards to benefits to AmeriCorps participants, we identified four studies that used causal study designs to examine whether national service impact AmeriCorps members employment or education outcomes. Among these few studies though, the findings were relatively mixed. One study found that AmeriCorps alumni who served through a reading program were more likely to work in nonprofit, public, or government sectors. The study that I mentioned earlier that identified AmeriCorps member profiles, this study found that one of those profiles, the Gappers, reported a greater increase in their basic work skills than a similar comparison group used in the study. However, those impacts were not found for other member profile groups.

The evidence we reviewed also pointed to other similarities between AmeriCorps members and the comparison groups in the studies. So for example, one study found that although opportunity youth serving with AmeriCorps showed increases in several education and employment outcomes, the comparison group members also experienced similar improvements in those areas. Next slide.

So three of those studies that examined education and employment outcomes also assessed impacts on AmeriCorps members civic engagement. Again, this evidence paints a little bit of a mixed picture. The study that examined the different AmeriCorps member profiles found that three of the profiles were more likely to show increases on opinions about being active in the community and the feasibility of working with neighbors to help meet local needs.

Then the study on the alumni for an AmeriCorps reading program, that study found that AmeriCorps members were more likely to report that they express their political views and participate in volunteer activities than the comparison group used in the study. The studies we reviewed also found several similarities between AmeriCorps members and participants compared to the comparison group on various measures of civic engagement and civic mindedness. Next slide, please.

Finally, we identified two studies conducted by contractors to AmeriCorps ORE that highlighted how AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers experience greater improvements in their physical and psychological wellbeing than a comparison group. One was a study of the AmeriCorps Seniors Foster Grandparent and Senior Companion Programs. This longitudinal study found that AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers who remained for their entire service reported greater improvements in their self-perceived health compared to a group of adult non-volunteers in the general population.

The other study we reviewed was a metasynthesis that summarized 27 other studies on AmeriCorps senior programs. So this review identified 12 positive outcomes based on impact study designs, which found that AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers had better physical health, overall functioning, life satisfaction, mental health, and social connectedness. So with that, I'm now going to turn it over to Sonali Nijhawan, who's going to offer her reflections on AmeriCorps participants, both as a former AmeriCorps member and now the director of AmeriCorps State National. Sonali.

Sonali Nijhawan:

Thank you so much, Scott. Thank you for your kind introduction. Thank you for walking us through this really meaningful research. It's been so enlightening and I feel like I find myself in one of those four quadrants and look forward to sharing that in a little bit. Also, want to just express my gratitude to my colleagues in the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation for bringing us all together today and for their commitment to building a meaningful research platform for national service.

As a proud AmeriCorps alum and the first AmeriCorps state national alum to serve as the director of AmeriCorps State National, as I shared, I truly do see myself in this research. In fact, I remember completing my own member exit survey. Not only do I see myself, but I see my colleagues and I see my friends, and I see the many people that I served alongside with and the many members who I built a program for so that they had the opportunity to serve as well.

While I do see myself in here in this research and the many members who contributed to these efforts, I also see so much potential, the potential for leveraging this robust evidence base to help service and volunteering programs learn from one another and adopt best practices. I see the space to inspire our elected leaders to make service a priority in their cities and states, and to encourage hiring managers across the country to bet on AmeriCorps alumni because they can be strong team players who know how to work across lines of difference. So really, really excited to be here and really feel so appreciative of the opportunity to just share my own personal story and connection to this work.

So as I shared, I am an AmeriCorps alum and I have been fortunate to build a career grounded in national service. It all began when I first put on my red jacket as an AmeriCorps member serving with City Year in my hometown of Chicago. I learned a lot in my service year. I learned a lot more than I actually expected to learn. I thought that it would be an opportunity to serve in my community, to do some good work, to work with kids, and that that would be it. I would do this year, I'd have this meaningful experience, and then I would go on to graduate school and maybe become a school counselor.

What happened is my life changed. This experience taught me about myself as a leader. It taught me about the community that I was working with, and it taught me about the importance of getting to know the people around you to learn about the community that you're serving in, to learn about the folks who are there doing the work with you. It taught me the importance of listening to understand, to build connections. It truly, truly changed my life. I don't know, and I've said this many a time, I don't know that I would've been here in this position having the opportunity to inform national service for the country had it not been for the opportunity to do this work in my hometown.

I think it feels right in this moment as we are celebrating our 30th year to just share a story and an experience that really was life-changing for me when I was an AmeriCorps member, and I think has served as a framework for me in doing the work since. I served with City Year a little over a decade and a half ago. I'll never forget going in bright-eyed, eager, and just ready to change the world, to sit and work with a group of third-graders who were going to be so eager to do a tutoring session with me. I'll just tell you, they weren't always very eager to sit in a tutoring session with me. We found our way and we had our fun.

The most meaningful moment for me was during my training when I was in a room with 80 other individuals who had decided to serve, and we were a diverse group of people. I grew up right outside of Chicago in a suburb. I had Corps members who had similar backgrounds to me. There were Corps members who grew up in the neighborhoods where we would be serving, and there were Corps members who would come from other parts of the country who wanted to make a difference in Chicago and wanted to serve students. I'll never forget, I was sitting in a room and we were talking about why we wanted to serve, and I was really eager to share my why. It was because I wanted to bring to the community all the things that I had in my life.

This young woman stood up, her name was Ebony, and she shared with me, she shared with all of us. She said, "Well, I keep hearing people say that they want to come and they want to make things better for us. I just want you to know, I grew up in the neighborhoods that you're coming to and we are doing great. We're trying really hard, and we really care about each other. We're excited that you're going to come and you're going to be part of our community, but we really want you to be part of our community. So please, when you come to the West Side or South Side of Chicago, when you come to our schools, when you engage with our students, ask them about themselves. Ask them what they want, ask their parents what they're looking for, and then take that information and help get them what they need and make sure that they're part of the process."

So from that moment on, I thought about, yes, I wanted to make things better, but I didn't want to just do it for someone. I wanted to bring everyone that I was serving with alongside me in this journey. That meant understanding the AmeriCorps member who came from rural Kentucky and had a different perspective of the world than I did. Understanding his perspective and him understanding my perspective, and us being able to have a conversation, find a pathway forward, and serve the students that we both cared so deeply about.

So I would just say, my service experience was one that has informed my career. I had the opportunity after serving to go on to launch a City Year site in Sacramento, California, and then went on to work with the former mayor of Stockton, Michael Tubbs to launch a place-based initiative in Stockton, California to bring AmeriCorps to a community that didn't have a framework for what AmeriCorps was or what it could be. In each moment, it has always been about taking a minute, listening to where people are, and ensuring that I can be a supportive hand to move that work forward. I think those lessons, that understanding, all came from my year of service and it continues to come from the many years of service that I've had the privilege of doing.

So I'm just really grateful that we have the opportunity to really understand the impact of our work. I'm really proud of all the work that this agency is doing today to help to invest in programs and to help to invest in people who are going to continue to open those doors for opportunity and lift up local leaders. AmeriCorps opened up a door for me and it continued to open up doors for me, and I'm really excited to be able to do that for so many more going forward. So thank you so much.

Last week was our kickoff for the 30th anniversary, so I'm also excited that we'll continue to be lifting up the impact of our service in communities, and we'll continue to tell those stories of service and the evidence-based work that we're doing. I'm really excited to be doing that with all of you. So thank you so much to the team, and I think I am going to now hand it back to Scott.

Scott Richman:

Thanks, Sonali, and thank you so much for sharing your wonderful story. So now I'm going to move now to the next part of the framework, which is to discuss the state of the evidence at the partner level. Next slide. AmeriCorps aims to support and empower nonprofit, faith-based, and community organizations to address the critical issues in their local areas.

Through its partnerships with these grantees and sponsor organizations, AmeriCorps provides them with AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps seniors volunteers to help partners increase their reach, build their capacity, and foster community partnerships. So in reviewing the evidence on AmeriCorps partners, we aim to answer the research question of in what ways has AmeriCorps helped build the capacity of partners to achieve their missions and better serve their communities? So in our review, we identified 10 studies that had a focus on AmeriCorps partners. Next slide.

So our review identified two QED studies of specific AmeriCorps funded intervention models that provided evidence that partnering with AmeriCorps helped organizations meet their project goals. This included helping AmeriCorps partners build 13% more homes per year and completing a greater proportion of environmental management activities when compared to other sites that did not host any AmeriCorps members.

Two other descriptive studies we identified also just suggested a similar theme. One of which was an analysis of survey data from the AmeriCorps NCCC sponsoring organization survey that completed service projects between 2016 and 2019. This study found that nearly all NCCC sponsoring organizations reported that their AmeriCorps NCCC team supported the organization's mission and helped the organization enhance services in the community. Next slide.

We also identified some emerging themes with regards to how partnering with AmeriCorps can help organizations build their capacity. A QED study conducted by an AmeriCorps ORE research grantee found that AmeriCorps VISTA sponsoring organizations had a significantly greater proportion of volunteers two years later than did organizations that did not host VISTA members. Two other studies also point to a similar theme, but these studies didn't include a comparison group that allows for a more causal conclusion.

One was an outcome study, which found that an AmeriCorps state and national volunteer infrastructure program helped community-based organizations to increase their volunteer management practices with regards to developing a volunteer plan and then implementing and sustaining that volunteer plan. We also reviewed a descriptive study that analyzed data from the AmeriCorps NCCC service project database. That study found that over one third of NCCC projects implemented capacity building activities such as supporting local organizations in their partnership and coalition building efforts.

So those were several arising themes from the evidence on AmeriCorps partners. Now for the AmeriCorps partner perspective, I'm going to hand things off to Mike Sullivan, who's the national Director of AmeriCorps programming for SBP.

Mike Sullivan:

Thanks, Scott. Hi, y'all. Grateful to be on this call this afternoon. As Scott said, my name is Mike Sullivan, and beyond serving as SBPs director of AmeriCorps programming, I also have the privilege of identifying as a proud AmeriCorps alum two times. SBP, we are a social impact organization focused on disaster resilience and recovery. We solve the challenges facing at risk communities and scale impact with a proven model that brings the rigor of business and innovation to reduce risk, create resilient communities, and streamline recovery. By taking this holistic approach, we're able to shrink the time between disaster and recovery.

Beyond disaster response our AmeriCorps programming largely focuses on long-term recovery, and I want to be super clear. Response and recovery operate on two very different timelines. It's hard to imagine how long the recovery process can take until you've experienced or witnessed disaster firsthand. So to give you a sense of what long-term actually means, I'd submit to you this. We are still rebuilding in New Orleans to return families displaced by Hurricane Katrina back to safe, sanitary, and secure living conditions. That's over 18 years. We've been in Puerto Rico and in Houston since

hurricanes Maria and Harvey in 2017, and in Florida since Hurricane Michael in 2018. It would appear that hurricanes Ian and Idalia will keep our team busy for the foreseeable future.

The people affected by disaster don't just lose their homes, they're at risk of reaching their breaking point, the point at which all hope is lost. If I may, before sharing some of my reflections, I'd like to start with a quote from one of our homeowners that our evaluation partners recently collected during a focus group. "We felt like we were stuck. We were in a position we didn't have control over. Then when SBP and their team came in and helped, it really gave us hope. We're thrilled with the agency's work and more specifically with the work of the Office of Research and Evaluation to pull together this excellent compendium of evidence."

I may be a bit biased as I often think that no AmeriCorps program can do what they do without AmeriCorps members, but it's just not all the way true. We would absolutely still be doing this work. The need exists. Our people are passionate about finding solutions. The support is there, but would we grow or scale impact as quickly? Would we accomplish the same volume of outcomes? Absolutely not.

It's hard to measure impact in the disaster response in the long-term recovery space. In fact, there's not a ton of validated research, which side note, has been a fun challenge to navigate in our own program's evaluation. I'm imagining that there may be a few program director chuckles out there. That aside this resource, this evidence, it helps us tell our organizational story to stakeholders as it provides context to the importance that AmeriCorps plays within our organization. Through our members, we've returned more than 4,268 families back into safe, sanitary and secure living conditions, preserving nearly \$50 million in home equity.

It's beyond the numbers. AmeriCorps is responsible for partnering like-minded individuals with our organization who have gone on to help innovate and shape the future of SBP, and in some instances influence the disaster recovery landscape at the state, at the local, and even the federal level. More than half of our current C-suite or national service alumni, largely having served with SBP in our earliest days, and currently more than 32% of our current staff at large are alums of national service.

So if you asked me to answer, does it matter that we have evidence in this space? Absolutely. It's nearly ineffable the extent to which these resources advance our mission. This is such an important topic, and I'd love to see the research dive deeper than the numbers.

Personally, I am a sucker for a good story. I believe that pairing impact with qualitative insights and interviews from partners that describe the intangible influence or impact that national service members have made on their organizations is a tool that is abundant with the ability to influence legislation, to turn a potential new funder's ear, to advance connections, and to network with employers who in turn may prioritize hiring more members post-grad. At the very least, it would certainly encourage more groups to consider ways in which they can leverage national service for their organizations.

I appreciate y'all's time in entertaining my personal reflection. I know that I can be a bit long-winded, ask anyone on my team and they'll give you that answer. So with all that, I'd love to turn it back to the good doctor, Dr. Scott. Thank you.

Scott Richman:

Appreciate that, Mike. So now I'm going to discuss the state of the evidence at the community level. Next slide, please. As part of its mission, AmeriCorps aims to strengthen communities by addressing local challenges. AmeriCorps partners with their members and volunteers go into local areas and provide services and interventions to communities and the individuals within them.

So in reviewing the evidence on AmeriCorps-served communities, we aim to answer the following research questions. What outcomes or impacts do communities serve by AmeriCorps-funded partners

experience? What does the research say about investments in and scaling of effective interventions? Our review identified 71 studies that focus on communities served by AmeriCorps. Next slide.

So to provide a deeper sense of this research, we identified 51 studies that examined impacts or outcomes associated with AmeriCorps-funded interventions. These studies spanned across the six focus areas of interest to AmeriCorps, but the education area by far had the largest number of studies. I won't go into all of these focus areas today, but we'll instead focus on just a few key themes. Next slide.

Within education, there were several areas that showed how AmeriCorps-funded interventions impact education outcomes for community individuals. One was in the area of students' literacy outcomes, which had eight studies that provided evidence of impact. These studies showed how reading and tutoring programs can improve literacy outcomes, particularly for younger students, and when the studies examined specific aspects of literacy development.

The evidence also showed how AmeriCorps programs also make a difference for high school students. For example, four studies that examined peer coaching models focused on college preparation, found positive impacts on students' academic performance in high school, while also fostering college preparation activities and enrolling in college. Next slide.

Within the environmental stewardship focus area, excuse me, we reviewed five impact studies that demonstrated how AmeriCorps-funded approaches protect vital ecosystems. These approaches included using restoration methods, suppressing invasive species, and conducting fuel reduction treatment activities. Overall, the evidence showed how these methods had a positive environmental impact by increasing plant survival rates and beneficial plant coverage, while also reducing plant damage, harmful plant species coverage, and the risk of wildfires. Next slide.

So our review also synthesized 12 return on investment studies commissioned by AmeriCorps ORE. These studies aim to further the knowledge base on the value that AmeriCorps funded programs can bring to communities. So in addition to the positive impacts that these programs have on communities, the studies show how funds devoted to all 12 of these programs can generate an even greater positive return on invested dollars over time.

These 12 studies span across the agency's focus areas of interest, which also helps to show the value of national service in tackling a variety of community issues. So now I'm going to turn things over to Antonio Mendez, who's the Deputy Director of Regional Programming for AmeriCorps NCCC for his perspective on how AmeriCorps makes a community impact.

Antonio Mendez:

Thank you, Dr. Scott. Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Antonio Mendez and I'm the Deputy Region Director for the AmeriCorps NCCC Southwest Region. It's a mouthful of a title, I know. Somali mentioned her service and Mike mentioned his. I'll mention mine. I participated in the Teach for AmeriCorps program in Newark, New Jersey. I won't say the date, but a long, long time ago. Most recently, I had the privilege of working as the executive director of Serve Colorado, the Governor's Commission on Community Service.

So I joined AmeriCorps back in April of 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and one of my first big assignments was to help support the creation and implementation of the COVID-19 Containment Response Corps. The COVID-19 Containment Response Corps, the CCRC, was a group of AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Senior volunteers who served as investigators for the state of Colorado during the COVID-19 pandemic supporting mainly with contact tracing and contact investigation.

AmeriCorps supported the CCRC effort by redeploying NCCC members and providing nearly \$2 million in federal funding for new AmeriCorps Vista Summer Associates and senior corps volunteers. The project initially included 300 AmeriCorps NCCC members from my campus, the Southwest Region campus, and about 350 Vista Summer Associates hosted by the Community Resource Center and Conservation Legacy, and 200 AmeriCorps Senior volunteers managed by Cultivate and Volunteers of America Colorado.

Aside from AmeriCorps, the project was a partnership between Serve Colorado, the state of Colorado, specifically the governor's office, the Department of Public Health and Environment, and Gary Community Investments. The success of the CCRC was the result of collaboration between partners, the innovation to see AmeriCorps members responding in novel ways in a time of need, and the community's willingness to trust our members.

Speaking on the success, the data's clear about the impact that our members had. Through their contribution to the CCRC AmeriCorps members, the AmeriCorps Senior volunteers served an estimated 58,067 instances of health intervention. 17,629 were served through case investigations. 7,635 through contact tracing, and approximate 32,803 through the test results delivered. So out of approximately 67,500 calls attempted. While our AmeriCorps members were willing and able to support, many of them lack experience in this specific type of public service. Members reported the emotional toll of reaching out to the people who were COVID positive and emotionally distraught as one of the leading causes of stress on the project in an area where they felt under-prepared.

Thankfully, NCCC was able to partner with AmeriCorps Seniors. The AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers were more successful with their ability to connect with potential positive members and to provide resources during this difficult moment. The coaching empowered the NCCC members who were between the ages of 18 and 26 year olds to have more successful calls. Simultaneously, NCCC members were able to provide mentorship to the AmeriCorps Senior volunteers who had trouble with the newly implemented REDCap software for contact investigation and contact tracing. It was a mutually beneficial relationship.

The CCRC prepared our corps NCCC members to be on the front lines in the response to COVID. Shortly after serving in the project, many members were deployed all over the country to support FEMA with their massive vaccination clinics. Just add a personal touch, I still remember the day I got a FaceTime phone call from my parents who were so happy that they were getting the vaccine and were standing next to an NCCC member from my campus who was providing logistics support for FEMA in Yonkers, New York. Two weeks later, I was able to hug my parents for the first time since the pandemic started, and that feeling was priceless. Mine wasn't the only story like this. We heard stories of families being reunited after several months, confident that their senior loved ones were safe from the virus after receiving their shot.

One of the biggest outcomes of serving the CCRC was that after their NCCC service, our members reported an interest in going to school to learn about public health. They got jobs working in county public health departments across the country or continued on in Colorado to address the issue. The impact of CCRC was felt throughout the state, and national service advocates took note of the success. Articles were written in Newsweek and in Time Magazine discussing the need to do something similar in other states. Our region was able to partner with the city of Topeka, Kansas, and other regions like the Southern region were able to work in a number of hospitals in their states coordinating logistics.

The partnership was created during the COVID-19 Containment Response Corps has only solidified. In 2022, AmeriCorps and the governor's office entered into a multi-year MOU to partner on economic mobility in the state of Colorado, helping by creating houses, providing tax returns to low-income Coloradans, supporting food banks, et cetera. Since that time, we've returned over \$15 million to Colorado residents, and we've heard folks say that their tax returns are helping them with education

needs for children, providing food security, and for some avoiding homelessness. We at NCCC are looking forward to continuing that impact in 2023. Thank you for the opportunity to present, and I'll send it back to you, Scott.

Scott Richman:

Great, appreciate it. All right, so now I'm going to discuss the last domain of the State of the Evidence framework, which is at the society level. Next slide. So AmeriCorps strives to make a lasting impact on the civic health of society and to be a thought leader in the field of volunteering and civic engagement. To this end, the agency has the overarching goal of generating evidence and new knowledge that advances our understanding of civic life in the United States.

So in reviewing the evidence on volunteering and civic engagement in society, we aimed to answer the following research questions. One, what are the societal rates of volunteerism and civic engagement in the US and what new insights has AmeriCorps funded research generated to advance the fields understanding of national service, volunteerism and civic engagement? Our review identified 25 studies in this area, and I'll share just a few of the themes we discussed in the report. Next slide.

So to help our understanding of volunteerism in the United States, AmeriCorps ORE has funded and analyzed data from the Current Population Survey, Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement since 2002. Our review covered the analysis of the 2019 CEV data, but I do want to note that the 2021 data is publicly available now, and ORE has published some analysis of this data this year.

The AmeriCorps ORE analysis of the 2019 data, the analysis showed how the volunteering rate in the United States is approximately 30% of all Americans, and that this rate remains stable for 20 years through 2019. The study also showed how volunteering rates varied by a number of individual and family characteristics. For example, women volunteer at a higher rate than men, and we also see differences in volunteering rates by education levels and household family income. Next slide.

The AmeriCorps ORE Research grant program has also expanded our knowledge base on fostering civic engagement. For example, in its 2018 grant cycle ORE prioritized funding for projects that use participatory research approaches, which engaged community individuals to identify local challenges and develop actionable solutions on how to address those issues. Our review identified eight studies that used a participatory research approach.

For example, one study was a project that engaged youth to identify local environmental injustices in their communities such as littering and dumping trash. They also identified the vulnerable populations affected by these environmental issues. Together, this team developed strategies and an action plan for how community members themselves could address these environmental injustices.

In another project, researchers worked with refugees in a major city to understand how to foster civic engagement and support community members to become drivers of change in their community. The project used collected survey and focus group data to identify actionable strategies that could increase civic engagement among refugees. This included offering workshops, creating guides, and holding events to bring the community together. Next slide.

We also identified five studies that highlight practices that could help organizations maximize the impact of volunteers, while also providing benefits to the volunteers themselves. So for example, assigning tasks that align to volunteers' goals, being supportive in your messaging to volunteers, providing professional development opportunities and building positive lasting relationships.

The evidence showed how these are associated with how long individuals continue to volunteer with their organization and the levels of satisfaction they have with their volunteer experience. Studies such

as these can provide AmeriCorps and its partners with important insights on how best to attract and retain AmeriCorps participants while also offering them meaningful national service experiences.

So now I'll close out and pass things off to Dave Medina, who is the COO and co-founder for Results for America. He'll share his perspectives on how AmeriCorps aims to advance the evidence and scholarship on volunteering and civic engagement. David.

David Medina:

Thanks a lot, Scott. Hello, everybody. I want to begin my brief remarks by thanking the entire AmeriCorps team for inviting me here today and to congratulate all of you on 30 years of evidence-based, results driven service. I also want to particularly thank Michael Smith for his strong leadership and his many years of friendship, and as well as Mary Hyde for her relentless focus on evidence and data.

Our results for America team has been partnering with AmeriCorps since 2014. During that time, AmeriCorps has built the capacity necessary to be able to build and use evidence and data in their budget, policy, and management decisions. They've invested more than 1% of their program funds in evaluation related activities each year. Very importantly, they've also defined and prioritized evidence of effectiveness in the allocation of AmeriCorps state and national grant program funds.

By setting aside 20 points out of a hundred, for applicants to the AmeriCorps State National Grant program with evidence of effectiveness, AmeriCorps has been able to increase the amount of AmeriCorps state national grant funds being invested in interventions with moderate or strong evidence to 50% this year. That is a major, major achievement. This groundbreaking work, which began in FY14, has helped lead the way for other federal departments to increasingly invest their own funds in what works through their own grant programs. Next slide, please.

For all of these reasons and more, we at Results for America, were very honored to have been able to present our Federal Standard of Excellence Silver Certification Award to AmeriCorps in 2022. They've been receiving similar awards since FY15. Next slide.

The federal AmeriCorps team, however, has also helped create positive momentum at the state level too. According to our analysis, 30 state service commissions, including many of yours, are currently using the same AmeriCorps state and national grant program application used at the federal level when allocating AmeriCorps state, national funds through their own state agencies. So I'll let you take a look at this slide for a few seconds to see if you are in one of the states that is defining and prioritizing evidence through the allocation of AmeriCorps state and national grants through your state.

This means that AmeriCorps headquarters and 30 state service commissions are very intentionally defining and prioritizing evidence of effectiveness when allocating these taxpayer dollars. From our perspective, this isn't just an amazing example of state and local coordination. It is unprecedented as far as we know across the federal government. So next slide.

If any of you work at a federal agency or a state service commission that is not currently doing this important work of defining and prioritizing evidence in your grant programs, please contact us at Results for America. Nichole Dunn, who's with us today, is the lead person to help with that. Just want to reiterate how important we see the work that has been done at AmeriCorps. It's not easy to ask grant applicants for this type of evidence, but it's so important to get to the outcomes that we all want.

So I'd like to just close my remarks today by once again, congratulating all of you, the entire AmeriCorps team, the AmeriCorps family for helping make our federal government more effective and efficient and also equally important for helping improve outcomes in communities all across the United States. So thanks to you all, and it is now my honor to introduce one of the nicest people in Washington DC, one of

the most passionate and most successful data and evidence champions here in our nation's capital, Mary Hyde.

Mary M. Hyde:

Thank you, David. That was very kind of you, kind introduction. Good afternoon or morning to all of you, depending on where you're sitting today. On behalf of AmeriCorps and the Office of Research and Evaluation, I want to thank you for taking time out of your day to help us celebrate our 30th anniversary and the evidence story we've been building together. Thank you to Scott and the Mathematica team for providing us with such a systematic, comprehensive, and independent review of what the body of evidence does and does not tell us about AmeriCorps impact on participants, partners, communities, and society.

The 2023 State of the Evidence report tells us where we've been and provides a clear roadmap for writing the next chapter of our evidence story. Thank you to Sonali, Mike, Antonio, and David for sharing your stories and your reflections on how AmeriCorps evidence resonates with your experiences as national service stewards and partners. Thank you to our CEO Michael Smith, who is such a critical champion of data and evidence. It is this type of commitment from the agency's top leader that helps foster a culture of learning and continuous improvement that is grounded in empirical evidence.

Last but certainly not least, I'm profoundly grateful to my team of researchers and evaluators and translators both past and present, who have believed so deeply in the transformative power of service, volunteering, and civic engagement, that they have dedicated their scholarly skills to building knowledge and service to improving lives.

Engaging in scholarship with societal relevance and impact crystallized as a professional goal for me after serving as a Jesuit volunteer in Baltimore, Maryland for Mark Shriver at the Choice Program. Like Antonio, I won't mention a name or age, but let's just say it was before AmeriCorps was born when I served with JVC. Prior to serving in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, I was a student at Boston College, focused on a psychology major. I was engaged in research as an undergraduate and completed a research thesis that earned me the honor of being one of a handful of scholars of the college at graduation.

My goal was to earn a PhD and become a clinical psychologist that informed my practice with research. My Jesuit education also engaged me in service as an undergraduate, and the idea of contemplatives in action really resonated with me. I decided to serve in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps before applying to graduate school. That decision changed the course of my career. Just as Sonali mentioned her service changed her course.

I did go on to earn a master's and a PhD in a human services psychology program. I specialized in community and social psychology. I conducted my first program evaluation for my master's thesis. Community-based and community-driven research and the applied research practice of program evaluation became my professional home and identity. My personal and professional journey has informed my vision for the why and the how of building research and evaluation evidence. Building evidence in collaboration with those seeking to improve their individual and collective wellbeing is central to my approach to this work.

Building rigorous evidence with relevance to our most pressing social issues is my priority. If we are not building evidence that can be used to make the world a more just place for all of us, then what is the point? Because I believe so strongly that the end goal for researchers and evaluators ought to be about using evidence and not just building it, I find the recent guidance on evidence-based policymaking published by the United States Government Accountability Office in July of this year incredibly useful

and encouraging. If we can move to the next slide to show people what I'm talking about, that would be great.

The guidance identifies 13 key practices that can help federal leaders and employees develop and use evidence to effectively manage and assess the results of federal efforts. If you take a look at the visual on the screen, you'll see what I'm talking about. AmeriCorps can proudly say it has embraced many of these practices as we celebrate our 30th anniversary as an agency. For example, in terms of planning, planning for results, AmeriCorps published its first learning agenda before the Evidence Act was passed.

We updated this learning agenda, our strategic learning and evidence building plan in 2022 to ensure alignment with the agency's strategic plan, and you'll see a link on the screen that can get you to that learning agenda. We've also been very busy assessing and building evidence, as you can tell by today's content. AmeriCorps has published state of the evidence reports, as Scott mentioned, that summarize the body of evidence for national service, volunteering, and civic engagement.

Today we have shared the findings from our most recent report. As an agency, we have invested the resources needed to generate evidence that can be used for program design, program innovation, program improvement, and demonstrating program impacts. In addition to evidence-based policymaking, AmeriCorps has also invested in using evidence to foster an organizational culture of learning and continuous improvement.

Using evidence, also important according to these practices, is also something that we've been making significant progress on. To encourage the use of evidence AmeriCorps engages in the following activities. We communicate learning and results through workshops and webinars on evidence use. We've been disseminating reports and resources through AmeriCorps impact page and evidence exchange. We've been making data available to the public through our open data platform, and we have been integrating three important new roles into the AmeriCorps organization.

An Office of Research and Evaluation Learning officer, Katy, who you met at the top of the hour is responsible for facilitating agency-wide evidence-based learning. In addition, the agency has integrated a chief data officer who is focused on data, accountability, and transparency of AmeriCorps enterprise data. Last but not least, we have recently integrated a deputy chief of staff for strategic engagement who has focused at least in part on using data and evidence to tell and sell the agency's story and communicate AmeriCorps value proposition to the public.

Our national service field is also using evidence in important ways. Just as David showed you with the commissions. I've had the privilege of joining the agency's director of AmeriCorps State and National on two site visits this year. Our first was to Poughkeepsie, New York to learn about how the city is using a planning grant to make service a core component of its cradle to career strategy. Central to this plan is the use of evidence-based national service solutions, which is giving the city a jumpstart in implementing its vision.

The second visit happened just this week. We joined Serve Virginia to celebrate the launch of the Virginia Community Engagement Index and the Virginia State Service Plan. Serve Virginia engaged community stakeholders in a data collection effort that has informed its strategic plan for strengthening Virginia's communities through service, volunteerism, and civic engagement. Our shared successes in building and using evidence are exciting and represent important progress, but our work is not done. Our next frontier for progress as an agency, our next moonshot, if you will, is deepening and sustaining our culture of learning and continuous improvement.

Continued success will require ongoing leadership commitment and involvement of all relevant stakeholders. A culture of organizational learning requires conversations, sometimes difficult, about accountability and resource decisions that affect the capacities needed to effectively build and use

evidence. A culture of organizational learning involves everyone, researchers, evaluators, non-researchers, non-evaluators, everyone. This has real life implications for roles and responsibilities, for skills associated with translating and using evidence and day-to-day operations, and for the mindsets, perhaps most importantly, the mindsets needed to embrace learning and continuous improvement. While not an easy road, I'm confident that AmeriCorps and its can-do spirit is up to the challenge.

Be sure to keep up with us on our evidence journey through our Research and Evaluation Digest, regular visits to americorps.gov's impact page, which you will find a link to in the chat, and our future webinars. As a teaser for what is to come, just this year, we have built out exciting new evidence that wasn't captured in this year's State of the Evidence report.

For example, we have compelling information about civic life in America during COVID-19 that we collected through the current population survey, civic engagement, and volunteering supplement. This is a survey as Scott mentioned, that is sponsored by AmeriCorps and has been sponsored by us since 2002, and it's administered in partnership with the US Census Bureau. The 2023 data is being collected as we speak and will be analyzed and released in 2024.

As another example of what's to come, we have recently released reports and data about the AmeriCorps participant experience. This information is collected through our annual survey of national service participants. For those interested in how participating in a national service program can influence a range of experiences and help build civic leadership skills, including bridging differences, as we referenced earlier, visit our impact page to learn more about it.

We will be exploring ways to enhance this survey in 2024, including the integration of our AmeriCorps Seniors into this important data collection effort. As a final preview of evidence that will be hot off the press in the very near future, we have been conducting a series of multi-year studies on our NCCC program. The findings will shed light on the leadership development, retention, and community impacts of this program.

These are just a handful of examples that illustrate that the evidence building journey is not done, and we will continue to do so, but we will do so with the goal of using this evidence for improving lives. So stay tuned and thank you again for your interest in the AmeriCorps evidence story and for celebrating our 30th anniversary with us. With that, I will turn it back to Katy.

Katy Hussey-Stoniker:

We're now at the close of our webinar. We'd like to thank Mathematica for their independent assessment of our evidence base and this report and presentation. We'd also like to extend our appreciation to each of our panelists for their perspective on our work at the participant, partner, community, and societal levels. We hope we hit our mark for today's webinar objectives and that you walk away from the session excited about AmeriCorp's 30th anniversary and our evidence story. I hope you join the Office of Research and Evaluation all year long as we present celebratory evidence and discussions on the multiplier effect of AmeriCorps' work.

Our next webinar will be October 24th and we'll focus on equitable data use. Please join us as we host panelists from the White House Data Equity Working Group and our AmeriCorps chief data officer and chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer. I'd like to extend a thank you to our Guardians of Honors colleagues for their technical support and coordination.

This webinar recording and support materials will be posted on the americorps.gov website under Impact Webinars within the coming weeks. Please feel free to share with your colleagues and networks. We will also be sending out a post webinar survey. So please let us know your thoughts on this webinar

and any ideas for future webinars. We hope you'll have a wonderful rest of your day and thank you very much for being a part of our evidence story.