



## Tips for Handling Tough Questions

(Updated February 18, 2025)

*Whether in a meeting with a member of Congress and their staff, or during a site visit, you may get questions you do not know how to answer. To help you prepare, below you will find strategies for answering tough questions and sample answers to some common and unique tough questions.*

### **Strategies for Answering Tough Questions**

When asked those questions, don't despair - utilize one of these strategies:

- **CONSTRUCT** your response with key messages:
  - *Response should include an emphasis on the impact AmeriCorps programs have on Americans across the country or in their communities, ideally including specific examples/statistics.*
  - *Response should include a mention of a program in the legislator's city/district or a program that is a priority for them to illustrate your point.*
- **PIVOT away** from the topic and **to** messaging related to the impact of AmeriCorps:
  - *"While I can't speak to [X], what I can tell you is [Y]."*
- **Nominally answer with a BRIDGE** back to your message:
  - *"[Very short answer to question], and in addition I'd like to note that..."*
- **Kindly ACKNOWLEDGE feedback** without engaging on the matter:
  - *"Thank you for sharing your perspective here. This is under consideration, and I'll be sure to share your thoughts with the team working on it."*

### **Common Tough Questions**

The following questions can be answered using the strategies above, and you should tailor them to your audience and community. However, we have included some suggested responses below to get you started.

#### ***How can AmeriCorps members know what's best for the communities they serve if they are not from there?***

- *AmeriCorps members become embedded in communities, working with local organizations and leaders, and making long-lasting tangible contributions based on a strong understanding of local needs.*
- *[Detail how AmeriCorps members have become integral parts of your community, especially if they have stayed in the community after their service.]*
- *[Equally as important, highlight how your program has recruited AmeriCorps members from the community.]*

**Why should the federal government spend money on AmeriCorps? Wouldn't it be more effective to fund programs directly?**

- *With AmeriCorps, the federal government shares costs with the organizations its members assist. Every federal investment in AmeriCorps requires matching funds from organizational partners, including private, philanthropic, and local sources. This shared investment expands the reach of its programs and creates on-the-ground community impact.*
- *Through this public-private partnership, every \$1 Congress invests in AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors returns more than \$17 in benefits to communities.*

**Why is funding AmeriCorps critical?**

- *In communities across the country – urban and rural – AmeriCorps members are providing on-the-ground support to critical community programs in schools, food banks, homeless shelters, health centers, veterans' facilities, and other nonprofit and faith-based organizations.*
- *AmeriCorps provides essential funds and people power for nonprofits in your community, such as [insert your organization] and [insert other notable organizations doing local work].*
- *Through this public-private partnership, every \$1 Congress invests in AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors returns more than \$17 in benefits to communities.*

**Is this agency stewarding federal dollars properly? We have heard about audits and claims that the AmeriCorps agency does not conduct proper oversight of its grants.**

- *In our experience as a grantee, AmeriCorps has rigorous monitoring practices to ensure programs and members are compliant with grant requirements. When noncompliance is identified, grantees are held accountable through collection of disallowed costs, development of corrective actions, or other appropriate remediations.*
- *However, by design, AmeriCorps was established as administratively lean. This, at times, has resulted in underinvestment in core business operations, with the agency's administrative funding not keeping pace with programmatic requirements and resulting in years of deferred investments in operations and infrastructure. This led to AmeriCorps' first disclaimed audit opinion in 2017.*
- *In January 2023, AmeriCorps launched a multi-year, whole-of-agency effort – the Financial and Operational Reform plan – to improve and sustain the agency's operations, remediate audit findings, and enhance financial reporting. The goal is permanent and sustainable financial and operating reform and a clean audit.*
- *This has been a top priority for agency leadership, and AmeriCorps has started to address historical underinvestment in their people, processes, and systems.*
- *They have made significant progress: working rapidly to respond to OIG and GAO recommendations, fix deficiencies, close audit findings, improve accuracy in financial systems, modernize their IT systems, and build a stronger agency.*
- *While full reform is expected to take five years, AmeriCorps has accelerated progress and is on track for major improvements in the 2025 audit.*

***Are AmeriCorps programs struggling to fill their positions?***

- *During the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery period, AmeriCorps programs faced a 2-year decline in applications and enrollment dipped. Service – like the broader workforce - was impacted by the mandatory social distancing, stay-at-home orders, and the ‘great resignation,’ all of which reshaped the way Americans work and participate in service. But interest started to rebound in 2023 and programs are reporting year over year gains in AmeriCorps applications.*
- *Voices for National Service surveyed AmeriCorps programs in April 2024 and found most are on the path back to their pre-pandemic outcomes and demand for AmeriCorps service opportunities has grown by 68% in the last two years.*