Guidebook for Communicating AmeriCorps' Local Impact

Voices for National Service

April 2025

Introduction

Building and maintaining relationships with public officials is a year-round commitment. We all need to tell the story of how AmeriCorps members and resources are helping to address locally determined needs and priorities across the country.

Why do we need to do this? AmeriCorps funding is decided annually by Congress, and it is not guaranteed. As an organization working on the front lines of community needs, you have an important role in communicating the value of AmeriCorps and reinforcing its impact on your community.

Public officials want and need to hear from their constituents. They have to make challenging funding decisions each year, and they are looking to community leaders to inform them about government-supported programs that are making a difference on the ground and in the lives of their constituents. This local feedback is critical, and engaging your lawmakers in a non-political, educational way about AmeriCorps' work is an allowable activity.

Engaging with your federal lawmakers at home is a key strategy for building relationships, and this guidebook provides tools for your organization to confidently communicate with public officials about AmeriCorps' impact on your community and beyond. While some of the talking points and suggestions are written with a federal audience in mind, these strategies can also be used with state and local officials.

If you need additional guidance with any of the information or resources in this guidebook, reach out to Voices for National Service for assistance.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1
Table of Contents 1
Chapter I: Key Messages 2
Chapter II: Responding to Frequently Asked Questions 5
General Strategies for Answering Tough Questions 5
Common Tough Questions 5
Chapter III: Engaging Public Officials 7
Hosting a Site Visit for a Member of Congress 7
Requesting a Meeting with a Member of Congress 9
Chapter IV: Letters to the Editor and Editorials 13
Writing a Letter to the Editor (LTE) 13
Writing an Op-Ed 14
Chapter V: Writing Letters to Members of Congress 16
Appendix 17
Appendix I: Template Site Visit Request Letter 18
Appendix II: Template District Meeting Request Letter 19
Appendix IV: Template LTE 20
Appendix V: Example Op-Ed 21
Appendix VI: Template Op-Ed 23
Appendix VII: Template Letter to Your Member of Congress 24

Chapter I: Key Messages

Before a meeting, site visit, interview, or other engagement, it is important to build in time to prepare. Think about who you will be speaking with and what questions they may ask. Make sure that you - and others participating in the engagement opportunity - have clarity on what you hope to achieve and what messages about AmeriCorps and your organization plans to highlight.

This chapter provides guidance to frame your messages to policymakers. The following high-level talking points should be strengthened with specific details about your organization and its local impact.

Tagline & Overview

NATIONAL SERVICE, LOCAL IMPACT

For the last three decades, AmeriCorps members have responded to locally determined needs and priorities. They are the "people power" that local nonprofit, faith-based, and community organizations rely on to deliver services and make a difference in local communities. While helping their neighbors, AmeriCorps members gain in-demand job skills and complete their service with increased employability and pathways to higher education, preparing a cohort of Americans to succeed in the workforce.

Each year, roughly 75,000 AmeriCorps members and 140,000 AmeriCorps Seniors are deployed to address immediate and critical needs in rural and urban communities across all 50 states, such as responding to natural disasters, tutoring students, combatting hunger and homelessness, connecting veterans to services, fighting the opioid epidemic, and much more.

AmeriCorps has demonstrated exceptional efficiency, strong private-sector collaboration, and high-impact results. With strong bipartisan support in Congress and a governance model rooted in balance and accountability, AmeriCorps delivers measurable results while providing critical services to veterans, disaster victims, and communities across the nation.

General Talking Points & Messaging

17-to-1 Return on Investment:

- As a public-private partnership, AmeriCorps is a unique example of federal government efficiency and tax dollar stewardship. For every federal dollar invested, AmeriCorps generates $17 in U.S.-wide economic value through private matching funds and the services its members provide to students and seniors, veterans and their families, and disaster victims. [1]

- AmeriCorps is a model for the entire federal government, proving that modest federal investment combined with the passion and expertise of the private sector and civil society can achieve enormous results for American taxpayers.

Financial Accountability and Private Sector Engagement:

- AmeriCorps grantees must secure matching funds, drawing significant investment from the private sector, foundations, nonprofits, and state and local governments. AmeriCorps aligns with free market principles by focusing on public-private partnerships and helping

individuals develop job skills without unnecessary government expansion.

- This structure ensures accountability, minimizes reliance on federal dollars, and fosters public-private partnerships.

Strengthening Workforce Readiness:

- AmeriCorps programs provide hands-on job training and skill development, particularly in high-demand fields like education, public safety, disaster response, and healthcare.

- Participants gain practical, upwardly mobile experience that prepares them for private-sector jobs and reduces dependency on government aid.

Promoting Economic Mobility & Self-Sufficiency:

- AmeriCorps gives individuals, especially young people and veterans, a structured opportunity to gain experience, earn education stipends, and transition into the workforce and civilian life.

- Many AmeriCorps alumni move on to private-sector jobs or start their own businesses, reinforcing the importance of personal responsibility and economic independence.

Supporting Local & Faith-Based Solutions:

- AmeriCorps doesn't believe that one-size-fits-all. Instead, AmeriCorps partners with local nonprofits, businesses, and faith-based organizations to address community workforce needs, ensuring solutions are tailored to local economies rather than dictated by Washington.

- These partnerships promote volunteerism and civic responsibility, reducing reliance on federal welfare programs.

Addressing Labor Shortages & Critical Industries:

- AmeriCorps members fill gaps in essential industries, such as teaching, disaster recovery, and skilled trades, helping to address national labor shortages.

- Programs focused on apprenticeships and vocational training help young people enter American industries that need qualified domestic workers, reducing the burden on government assistance programs.

Critical Role in Disaster Recovery:

- AmeriCorps works hand-in-hand with FEMA and other government agencies to provide **on-the-ground assistance** during disasters.

- Recent examples include the agency's invaluable role in recovery efforts after **Hurricane Helene**, where members helped victims rebuild their lives and communities.

- AmeriCorps' ability to rapidly mobilize skilled teams during emergencies saves lives, reduces long-term recovery costs, and provides immediate relief when it's needed most.

Supporting Veterans & Their Families:

- AmeriCorps invests in organizations and programs that directly support veterans and their families, helping them transition back into civilian life, find housing and jobs, and access

mental health services.

Bipartisan Support:

- **Broad Bipartisan Support in Congress**: AmeriCorps has consistently enjoyed strong bipartisan support from House and Senate lawmakers. Members of both parties recognize the program's efficiency, ability to address critical community needs, and significant return on investment.
- **State Leaders Endorse AmeriCorps**: Republican and Democratic governors and mayors have championed AmeriCorps as an essential partner in addressing state and local needs.

Strengthening Communities, Reducing Long-Term Costs:

- AmeriCorps builds stronger communities by reducing long-term dependency on government aid through solutions that address root problems, such as housing, education, and emergency preparedness.

- For example, partnerships with organizations like **Teach for America**, **Habitat for Humanity**, **City Year,** and [*insert your organization*] multiply the impact of every federal dollar, improving outcomes for students, families, and underserved communities.

Chapter II: Responding to Frequently Asked Questions

Most frequently asked questions can be answered using the key messages and general talking points in Chapter I, tailored to your audience and community. But some tough questions require more preparation.

General Strategies for Answering Tough Questions

- **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/state 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

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 technology and infrastructure.

- 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 historic 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 two-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 recruitment outcomes and demand for AmeriCorps service opportunities has grown by 68% in the last two years.

Chapter III: Engaging Public Officials

Public officials want to hear from you. Inviting them to visit your service site, requesting a district meeting, or attending a town hall are all opportunities to educate them on how your organization is using AmeriCorps members and resources to deliver services their constituents need and to strengthen the communities they represent. Lawmakers and their staff take care to understand their community's needs, as it helps them weigh policy priorities. Your respectful engagement as a constituent or an organization serving their constituents is therefore always welcome.

Congressional Recess

Congressional recess is when members of Congress head home to spend time with constituents in their district or state. This work period can be a week to a month long, and it is a great opportunity for you to meet with your representative and senators or their staff. Take advantage of these recess periods to invite your lawmakers to visit your program and experience firsthand the impact you have on the lives of the people in your community. You can visit the Voices for National Service webpage for details on the congressional calendar and upcoming recess dates.

Hosting a Site Visit for a Member of Congress

A visit to an AmeriCorps service location is the best way to showcase the critical services your program provides to the local community and the real-life benefits of fully funding AmeriCorps. Seeing AmeriCorps members in action is compelling and a successful site visit can help you cultivate a relationship with a lawmaker that will benefit your organization and AmeriCorps for the long term.

Refer to Appendix I for a template site visit request letter.

Tips for requesting and hosting a successful service site visit include:

- **Send a formal invitation:** Even if you speak in person with a member of Congress or their staff about visiting your program, it's important to follow up with a formal invitation. The first step is to call the lawmaker's office and ask for the scheduler's name, email address, and their preferred method for receiving invitations to events in the state or district. If you know the policy staffer who handles AmeriCorps, you should copy them on your email to the scheduler. If a board member or other community partner who knows your program well has a relationship with the legislator, ask for their help elevating your invitation. They could co-sign your letter or make a follow-up phone call or email.

- **Be flexible in suggesting potential dates/times for a site visit:** Scheduling can be difficult. In your initial outreach, offer several options of days/times that your program could welcome the lawmaker. Members of Congress are often inundated with requests and have limited availability for visits, events, and engagements in the district. Your flexibility, to the extent possible, will improve the likelihood of successfully scheduling a visit.

- **Be sure to follow up on pending invitations:** Members of Congress receive far more requests for their time than they can reasonably fulfill, and sometimes invitations get lost. While you should be patient with the scheduler, you should follow up if you haven't received a response to a pending invitation after a week or more. Call the office or send the scheduler an email and confirm they received the invitation.

- **If the lawmaker is not available on any upcoming date**, you should consider asking the State or District Director to visit your program. The State/District Director are both senior members of the congressional office staff **and** successfully engaging them can pave the way for future opportunities with the member of Congress.

- **Choose the right service location:** Members of Congress and elected officials who represent a specific geographic area will be most interested in and willing to visit an AmeriCorps service site located within their congressional district or nearby. If you have multiple service locations, do your best to offer the opportunity to visit an AmeriCorps service location within the district they represent, but make sure the location is also a strong example of your program's service model. If your program serves inside a school, health center, or any facility managed by another entity, make sure they know that you plan to invite an elected official to see your program. They may want to join the visit and help validate the critical impact your AmeriCorps members have on their operations.

- **Once a visit is scheduled, let Voices for National Service know:** To maximize the success of your visit, Voices can help provide resources, insight, and expertise. Voices has tools that can enhance a visit with an elected official and can also help answer any questions you have throughout the process – contact Voices for National Service for assistance.

- **Invite external validators to participate in the site visit:** Elected officials will want to know how the investment in AmeriCorps impacts the local community. It always helps to have external validators – such as private sector funders, board members, community partners, or school district representatives – join the visit to speak in support of AmeriCorps and your impact in their community.

- **Confirm whether the visit will be open or closed to press:** This will affect your preparation for the visit. If the elected official wishes to have the event open to the press, a media advisory will have to be issued, in coordination with the elected official's office. If your AmeriCorps members serve inside another organization, your host may have local press contacts and relationships that they can involve. With permission from the lawmaker's communications office, you may wish to amplify the event through a joint press release posted across your channels (website, social media, newsletter, etc.) and send to the media.

- **Be careful not to engage in political campaign activity:** As nonpartisan organizations that receive federal funds, AmeriCorps programs should only invite currently serving government officials to visit their programs, not candidates for political office. Visits may not occur in connection with any political campaign activities, and photos or videos of site visits may not be used in campaign materials.

- **Highlight the connection between federal funding and the impact your program has in the local community:** During the site visit, remember to explain that your program receives federal funding from the AmeriCorps agency (officially referred to as the "Corporation for National and Community Service" in the federal budget), which is then matched by private and local support. It is often worthwhile to offer some "AmeriCorps 101," even to those who may be expected to understand how the program works. Furthermore, be sure to show clear co-branding with AmeriCorps or AmeriCorps Seniors. For example, make sure your "AmeriCorps serves here" sign is prominently displayed during any site visit and any AmeriCorps members serving at the site that day are wearing their AmeriCorps-branded gear.

- **Provide briefing materials in advance of the visit:** Elected officials will almost always receive a briefing memo from their staff in advance of any event or appearance. If you proactively provide the office with your own briefing memo several days in advance of the scheduled visit, you will save them time and ensure that up-to-date detail on your program is presented to the lawmaker prior to the visit. Voices can assist in providing relevant policy updates to include in a briefing memo.

- **The ask:** After you've communicated AmeriCorps' importance to your community, you should ask the member of Congress and/or staffer to take specific action in support of national service. This provides an opportunity to follow up with the office and could garner a commitment to take action.
    - Ask the member of Congress to protect the federal investment in AmeriCorps.
    - Remember to utilize Voices for National Service's talking points and key messages in Chapter I as a guide.
    - Invite them to join the National Service Congressional Caucus, if they are not a member.

- **Share about the visit on social media:** Take pictures of the elected official visiting your AmeriCorps program and interacting with AmeriCorps members, and tag the elected official, @AmeriCorps/@AmeriCorpsSr, and @Voices4Service when posting on social media. This provides an opportunity to thank the elected official publicly and, if the elected official reposts the picture from his or her account, generates publicity for your program and national service. Voices for National Service will repost it, too!

- **Thank the elected official for visiting:** A simple thank you note can go a long way. At a minimum, follow up with the elected official's staff via email, thank them for taking the time to visit, and provide any materials that were discussed or requested during the visit.

- **Let Voices for National Service know how the site visit went:** A successful visit can often lead to future engagement with the elected official. You can debrief with the Voices' team after the visit to organize a follow-up plan that will build upon your great work. Send photos from the visit to Voices, so we can help amplify.

Requesting a Meeting with a Member of Congress

A meeting with your member of Congress is one of the most valuable ways to educate them on the impact your program has in the communities they represent and the important role AmeriCorps funding plays in those results. By educating them about the impact of your program, you can encourage your representatives to become champions of your organization and AmeriCorps.

A one-on-one meeting will carry more weight than signing a petition, sending a letter or email, or making a phone call, and there are many advantages to holding your meeting in the local office, not Washington, D.C. Scheduling a meeting with the district/state office is simple and allows you to establish a relationship that can be deepened over time.

Below are some tips for requesting and leading a successful in-district meeting with your member of Congress or a senior member of their staff. Refer to Appendix II for a template letter that can be used to request a district meeting.

- **Selecting a date for your in-district congressional office meeting:** When requesting a meeting, try to contact the local office at least two weeks before your preferred meeting date. If it is important that you meet with the lawmaker, you should seek an appointment during a congressional recess or on a Monday morning or Friday afternoon, when the legislator is most likely to be in the district. It is recommended to offer several days or a span of time when you would be available to meet.

- **Scheduling a one-on-one meeting with your local congressional office:**
    - First, call the local office and let them know that you are seeking to schedule an in-district meeting with the lawmaker or their staff, and find out who you need to email to secure an appointment. If you are having trouble contacting them, contact Voices to request the scheduler's information.
    - Second, draft an email message that includes a general description of your organization, the purpose of the meeting, who will be in attendance (note any constituents), and dates of availability. Be prepared to follow up on your meeting request if you do not receive a response after a week or more. **Voices recommends asking if you can meet with the lawmaker OR their District/State Director,** both senior members of the congressional office staff. Developing a relationship with the District or State Director can really benefit your organization in the long term. If you do not know the name of the District or State Director for your elected officials, contact Voices for that information.

- **Once you've scheduled your meeting, let Voices for National Service know:** Voices for National Service wants to track all the federal engagement happening across the country, and make sure you feel confident and prepared for your meeting. Contact Voices once you've scheduled a meeting with your member of Congress or their staff to receive support in answering questions and planning for the meeting.

- **Decide who should attend the meeting to help demonstrate the breadth of support for AmeriCorps in your area:** District office meetings about AmeriCorps funding are strongest when the congressional office can see multiple community members, representing different organizations or perspectives, speaking about the impact AmeriCorps has locally. As you plan for your district office meeting, Voices recommends inviting another AmeriCorps program, a service partner, board member, AmeriCorps alumni, or other local validators from your area to participate in your meeting. It is best not to invite the press or the general public, as members of Congress and staff are more inclined to speak freely and share information during private meetings. If appropriate, ask your meeting participants to show clear co-branding with AmeriCorps or AmeriCorps Seniors – for example: they can wear AmeriCorps branded clothing or a lapel pin to the appointment. If it is a virtual meeting, you can use an AmeriCorps Zoom background or incorporate branding into your visible frame.

- **Prepare for your meeting:** Review background information about your members of Congress and see if they have taken any position on relevant issues. To find key data points about AmeriCorps' investment statewide, review your National Service in Your State Report.
    - Review Voices for National Service's talking points in Chapter I to prepare for the meeting.
    - Congressional staff often refer back to materials given to them in meetings. Creating a folder with relevant materials to share with the member or congressional staff at the start of the meeting is recommended:

        - Information on your organization, including impact stats and stories.
        - National Service in Your State Report – download the state profile from americorps.gov. This report demonstrates the full scope of AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Senior presence in your state from February 2024 to February 2025.
        - National Service Congressional Caucus one-pager
        - Relevant local news articles (including any Letters to the Editor or Op-Eds) that discuss the impact of AmeriCorps.

- **Arrive early:** Many district offices are located in government buildings, where you must pass through security at the entrance. Give yourself enough travel time so you are not late for your meeting.

- **Be prepared with a meeting agenda:** While the meeting structure may vary based on whether the member of Congress is present or how much time has been allotted for the meeting, it is recommended to follow this meeting flow:
    - Open by thanking the office for their time and by distributing meeting materials, including any leave-behind documents.
    - Introduce the group. Each participant should briefly share their relationship with AmeriCorps and how AmeriCorps is helping to solve pressing needs in the region.
    - Highlight the connection between AmeriCorps funding and the impact your program has in the lawmaker's community, i.e. "Because of AmeriCorps, we are able to…"
        - Use relevant data and statistics to show the benefits your program is providing to the community.
        - Explain how you must match your AmeriCorps grant with funds from private and local sources, and how this public-private partnership returns $17 in community benefits for every $1 Congress appropriates to AmeriCorps.
    - Discuss appropriations and how AmeriCorps is needed to protect your work. Explain how cuts to federal funding for AmeriCorps could jeopardize the services the lawmaker's constituents rely upon and destabilize your organization, i.e. "Without AmeriCorps, we would be unable to…"
    - Close the meeting with three "asks":
        - Ask the member of Congress to protect the federal investment in AmeriCorps.
        - Invite them to join the National Service Congressional Caucus, if not already a member.
        - Invite the lawmaker and their staff to visit your AmeriCorps program for a site visit.
    - At the end of the meeting, ask the staff or lawmaker to take a photo with you, so you can share your appreciation on social media. Don't forget to tag @AmeriCorps/@AmeriCorpsSr and @Voices4Service in your post and send the photo to Voices for additional amplification.

- **Communicating your message:** It is important to be disciplined, positive, and transparent. Stick to general themes and talking points in Chapter I but strengthen them with specifics about your organization and its local impact. Make sure to emphasize points that you know will resonate with your member of Congress. If you are asked a question that you do not know the answer to, it is okay to say, "I will follow up with that information, as soon as possible" – just be sure to follow up!

- **Listen and gather information:** It is important to take detailed notes and record any

commitments that are made. Be concise, patient, and always avoid being argumentative, even if the member of Congress and/or staffer disagrees with your perspective; review Voices' Tips for Handling Tough Questions in Chapter II to prepare.

- **Follow Up:** After the meeting, thank the member of Congress and/or staffer for their time and get the staffer's business card or email address. Most offices have staff business cards located at the front desk. Follow up with the staff on anything that was left unclear or unanswered. Always send a follow-up email in which you should thank the member of Congress and/or staffer for taking the time to meet with you, summarize the meeting - including any specific asks that were made by you or commitments made by their office - answer any questions that were left unanswered, and link to any materials that were requested.

Virtual Meetings

Scheduling and preparing for virtual meetings are very similar to the process for face-to-face meetings. Below are additional tips for a virtual environment:

- When speaking with the scheduler, ask if their congressional office has a preferred virtual platform (Zoom, Teams, etc.) and if the office would prefer to host the meeting or receive an invitation from you.
- Many people can attend a virtual meeting but limit the speaking roles to four people or fewer. If you are planning to have more than four people join the call, check in with the congressional office to see if they are okay with a larger call and clarify that only four people will have speaking roles.
- The senator or representative may be able to join only a portion of your meeting, depending on their schedule. It is normal for a member of Congress to leave a meeting early or join partway through. Be flexible and mindful of time.
- Prepare PDF versions of your leave-behind materials and email them to staff on the call. Do not rely on the chat feature of the platform to share these resources.
- Be mindful that staff often keep their video turned off during virtual meetings.

Attend a Town Hall or Other Public Events that the Lawmaker is Hosting

If you are unable to schedule a meeting or host your own service site visit, consider going to an event that the lawmaker is hosting, or one at which they are scheduled to appear. Take whatever opportunity might present itself to make a short introduction so they know you are present.

Chapter IV: Letters to the Editor and Editorials

Lawmakers and their staff closely monitor constituent interests and concerns via local and regional media outlets, making them an effective avenue for reaching federal, state, and local leaders.

Writing a Letter to the Editor (LTE)

Letters to the Editor (LTE) are widely read not only by members of Congress and their staff, but also the general public, newspaper editors and reporters, and other opinion leaders. An LTE that speaks to a broader audience, and underscores AmeriCorps' vital importance to the local community, is a great way to get your legislator's attention and garner more public support.

Refer to Appendix IV for a Template LTE.

Keep these helpful tips in mind when writing an LTE:

- **Respond to recent news:** Often, LTEs respond to a specific article that recently ran in the paper, so it is important to closely monitor any local news regarding the federal budget/appropriations, AmeriCorps, local programs, and/or community service more generally. However, newspapers also accept LTEs that do not refer to a specific article. It's a good idea to look at the LTEs in the paper you are targeting to get a flavor for the types of letters they publish.

- **Stay local:** Consider submitting to a smaller local paper, not just the nearest big city paper. You'll have a better chance of getting published and still get noticed by your members of Congress.

- **Keep your letter short, focused, and interesting**: Stay focused on one (or, at the most, two) main point(s) -- i*n this case, protecting AmeriCorps funding*. Include interesting facts, relevant personal experience, and any local connections to the issue. Wrap your letter up by explaining what you think needs to happen and making a call to action. If you are trying to influence a legislator(s), refer to them by name so they are more likely to see your letter in their news coverage.

- **Stick to word limits:** Papers have a word limit for LTEs, and you must stick to it. Look up the word limit for your intended publication (google the name of the publication and "letter to the editor submission") prior to drafting. Be clear and concise – most only allow about 150 words.

- **Submitting your LTE:** You can find the email address for submitting your LTE on the newspaper's website. Paste your letter into the body of your email – do NOT include it as an attachment.
    - Many newspapers require that letter writers submit contact information with their letter. Phone numbers won't be published. This is just to verify your identity.

- **Keep Voices for National Service posted:** Assistance is available for editing your LTE and providing advice on placement, if needed. Once your LTE is published, share it with Voices to ensure it reaches members of Congress and receives amplification on social media.

Writing an Op-Ed

Opinion pieces can play a crucial role in highlighting AmeriCorps' significance to the work of local organizations, its impact on local communities, and why AmeriCorps should be protected.

Refer to Appendix V for an example Op-Ed and Appendix VI for a template Op-Ed.

Helpful tips for writing your op-ed include:

- **Make sure it communicates an opinion:** The purpose of an op-ed is to offer an opinion on a topic that is timely and unique. Your chances of getting your op-ed published are much stronger if you can connect your submission to the current news cycle and make it relevant to local readers.

- **Grab the reader's attention at the top:** From the first line, your op-ed should compel people to keep reading and not lose their attention to another headline. Try to avoid an opening that is just background information. Instead, write an opening that says something new or clever.

- **Write fast, edit deliberatively:** You should be able to communicate what you are trying to say in one sentence (journalists call this the "budget line"). Build out your draft or outline from there. As you write your thoughts down on paper, connect them back to that one line.

- **Keep it simple:** The goal of an op-ed is to persuade. To persuade someone, they must understand your message. When you are trying to articulate your opinion, write how you speak. For example, you would not say: "We are experiencing precipitation, and I failed to secure the entrance." You would say "It's raining, and I forgot to lock the door." In most cases, short, simple sentences are best. While writing with lofty vocabulary and jargon may impress experts, it can lose the attention of a typical reader. Let verbs be verbs and try to avoid adverbs, jargon, and acronyms. It is helpful to read your draft out loud once it is complete, as areas of improvement will become clearer.

- **Emotional connection:** To persuade your intended audience, your writing must inspire an emotional connection in the reader. You want the reader to care about your cause. If your piece does not make someone think about your issue, it's not going to bring them to your side.

- **Use examples:** Readers often do not remember facts or statistics, but they will remember stories. People desire emotion and connection. They are more sympathetic motivators than any organization. Real-life examples can help humanize a complex topic. Anecdotes also provide opportunities to include and activate local people who have benefited from AmeriCorps who may be interested in standing up for the program.

- **Conclusion**. It often helps to end with a call to action, such as urging your members of Congress to support AmeriCorps. Refer to the member(s) by name, if you're submitting to a local paper (versus a national outlet).

- **Length**. Op-eds are typically 500–750 words in length, and it helps to know the word guidelines before you start drafting. You can google the name of the paper and "submitting an op-ed" to find specific instructions for that paper.

- **Getting placed:** When you have a strong piece, it is time to pitch it.

    - Landing a placement requires identifying an outlet that is a good fit for the target audience. For AmeriCorps partner organizations, it will most likely be a local, community, or regional paper.
    - To find submission instructions, google the name of the paper and "submitting an op-ed." You will likely get a general email address. If possible, also look up the name of the opinion page editor and include them in the email as well.
    - Unless the paper has a form submission, include a concise pitch note when submitting. When writing it, try to think about how to recycle your "one sentence" that captures what you have to say in the op-ed. You do not need to fully contextualize your piece beyond 2–3 sentences of what you seek to convey and why they should be interested. **Include the text of the op-ed in the body of the email (not as an attachment).**
    - It is helpful to have an eye-catching subject line, as editors receive many submissions each day. Include your name, email address, and phone number in your submission, and let them know that you are only submitting the op-ed to their paper.
    - Most papers need three days to get back to you (and, unfortunately, many do not respond if they decide not to publish your piece). Before you move on to another outlet, email again (and try to call) to check on the status of your piece.
    - If you have gotten a rejection or not heard back after your first follow-up, you can move on to another paper.

- **If your piece is accepted**: Your op-ed may receive a few tweaks, and editors often change headlines. Once the piece has been published, do not forget to use the publication's link when sharing it across your social channels and in newsletters. Extra amplification can go a long way toward getting your message in front of – and reinforcing it with – the right audience.
    - Emailing your published piece to Voices ensures it is amplified across communication channels.

- **Op-ed alternatives:** If you are struggling to place a piece, don't give up! It is still impactful to publish the piece using your own channels, such as a blog post on your website, or through a post on sites that are used for communicating ideas and policy positions, like Medium or LinkedIn. Posting your piece on more than one channel can help amplify your organization's impact and story.

Chapter V: Writing Letters to Members of Congress

Your AmeriCorps program has many stakeholders: your board members, service partners, philanthropic supporters, the Chamber of Commerce, your mayor and city council members, service beneficiaries, AmeriCorps alumni, and more. These respected members of your community can be policy influencers, and, if activated, can validate the importance of your work and AmeriCorps.

A well-crafted letter from your executive leadership or any of these local stakeholders and champions can be an effective tool to communicate AmeriCorps' unique value to your community and the importance of federal funding.

Refer to Appendix VII for a template letter.

Tips for completing and sending this letter include:

- As you customize the content for the letter, you should discuss whose letterhead you want to use - for example, would it better to use the letterhead for your program or one of your board members' organizations? Choosing the letterhead that will attract the most attention from your lawmakers is recommended.

- It is recommended to send the letter to the senators and all representatives whose congressional districts your program serves. If you do this, be sure to address the letter to all recipients.

- If you want to reference the total number of AmeriCorps members serving in your state, the information can be found in your state's National Service Report.

- Letters do not require ink or e-signatures. You can simply add the name, title, and organization for each signatory after the closing.

When the letter is ready to submit – email copies to the lawmaker's Chief of Staff and their State/District Director AND send a copy by physical mail to the Washington DC office. You can call the congressional office to ask for those staffers' names and email addresses, or contact Voices for the information. Note that regular mail can be very delayed getting to congressional offices, so make sure to email it as soon as possible.

Appendix

Appendix I: Template Site Visit Request Letter

This template letter or email message should be customized and sent to the congressional scheduler or district director.

Dear [*SCHEDULER/STAFFER NAME*],

I am writing on behalf of [*ORGANIZATION NAME*], located in [*OFFICIAL'S DISTRICT/STATE*], to see if [*MEMBER OF CONGRESS NAME*] is available to visit [*specify the program along with a meeting location, time frame and/or specific dates*].

> *Example: "City Year, a nonprofit service organization operating in Columbia, invites Senator Tim Scott to visit our program during the August congressional recess (August 1–September 5) to witness firsthand how our AmeriCorps members serve as tutors and mentors for K-12 students. We would be honored to host Senator Scott at Heyward Gibbes Middle School in Columbia, SC."*

[*Insert a description of your program. In 2-3 sentences, provide a brief overview of your program and explain how AmeriCorps funding and AmeriCorps members help your organization deliver tangible impact in the state or congressional district*].

> *Example: "Across the country, City Year partners with 259 schools and 60 school districts to serve 134,000 students. Schools that partner with City Year are up to two to three times more likely to improve in English and math assessments. And the more time students spend with City Year AmeriCorps members, the more likely they are to improve academic skills and increase attendance, with the students who are furthest behind benefiting the most. Through a visit to Gibbes Middle School, you will have the opportunity to witness the impact that City Year AmeriCorps members are having in Richland County Schools and how resources from AmeriCorps are helping to support this work. You will be able to experience what City Year brings to the school environment, hear about our effective partnership with Richland County Schools, and speak directly with City Year AmeriCorps members about the value of service in the lives of their students and how it is helping them gain in-demand job skills and prepare for success in the workforce."*

AmeriCorps grants and service members provide community organizations with the resources we need to solve local challenges. Unlike most federal grant programs, AmeriCorps grants are matched by funds from private, philanthropic, and local sources, and every $1 Congress invests in AmeriCorps returns more than $17 in benefits to communities. AmeriCorps is one of the best investments the federal government can make, and we would welcome the opportunity to show you the impact of this vital program in [*DISTRICT/LOCATION NAME*].

The date of this visit is flexible, and we are open to discussing the timing and logistics to accommodate [*MEMBER OF CONGRESS NAME*]'s schedule. I will contact you again in a few weeks to follow up on this invitation, or you can reach me directly at [*PHONE NUMBER AND EMAIL*]. Thank you for your consideration.

Best,
[*NAME*]
[*TITLE, ORGANIZATION*]
[*PHONE NUMBER*]

Appendix II: Template District Meeting Request Letter

This template letter or email should be customized and sent to the congressional scheduler or district director. This request is drafted for an in-person meeting and may need to be customized for a virtual interaction.

Dear [*SCHEDULER/DISTRICT DIRECTOR NAME*],

I am writing on behalf of [*ORGANIZATION NAME*], located in [*OFFICIAL'S DISTRICT/STATE*], to request a meeting with [*NAME OF SENATOR/REPRESENTATIVE*] to discuss federal funding for AmeriCorps. AmeriCorps is a valuable resource that is helping local nonprofits address the needs of this community, and we would like to share why it is critical for our community. We hope to meet on [*PROVIDE TIME FRAME OR SPECIFIC DATE OPTIONS*] but are happy to work with you to accommodate [*NAME OF SENATOR/REPRESENTATIVE*]'s schedule.

Our group will include:

- [*Name, Title, Organization, City*]
- [*Name, Title, Organization, City*]
- [*Name, Title, Organization, City*]

[*Personalize here in 2–3 sentences, including the following information:*

- *Briefly introduce your organization, with a link to any public-facing website.*
- *Explain how AmeriCorps funding and AmeriCorps members help your organization deliver tangible impact in the state or congressional district].*

AmeriCorps grants and service members provide our community organizations with the people power that we need to solve local challenges, and - unlike most federal grant programs - AmeriCorps grants are matched by funds from private, philanthropic, and local sources. Economists have found that this efficient public-private partnership yields more than $17 in benefits for every $1 invested by Congress.

[*OUR ORGANIZATION*] is just one of many local nonprofits that is harnessing the power of AmeriCorps members to help address some of our region's most pressing social and economic challenges. Across [*STATE*], there are [*#*] AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors working hand in hand with local partners to respond to natural disasters, tutor students, combat hunger and homelessness, fight the opioid epidemic, help seniors live independently, support veterans and military families, and much more. Our community and your constituents rely on AmeriCorps service members for resources every day.

I look forward to meeting with [*NAME OF LEGISLATOR*] to share more about our work and the critical role AmeriCorps plays in our ability to serve your constituents. If they are unable to meet with us, we would like to meet with the District or State Director. I will contact you again in a few weeks to follow up on this request, or you can reach me directly at [*PHONE NUMBER AND EMAIL*]. Thank you for your consideration.

Best,
[*NAME*]
[*TITLE, ORGANIZATION*]
[*PHONE NUMBER*]

Appendix IV: Template LTE

Below is an LTE template that you can customize with your story or insights:

[Note: Voices recommends you look at the LTEs in the paper you are targeting to get a flavor for the types of letters they publish. Also, be sure to check the paper's LTE instructions, especially word length guidance.]

Subject: [City or State Name] is Stronger Because of AmeriCorps

Dear Editor,

Thousands of people in our community rely on the critical services provided by AmeriCorps members, who are the "people power" behind many of our nonprofit and faith-based organizations – including [x, y, and z].

AmeriCorps fills gaps in essential industries, such as teaching, disaster recovery, public safety, and healthcare, while simultaneously providing hands-on job training and skills development for its members. AmeriCorps also delivers an impressive return on investment, with every $1 invested by the federal government generating over $17 in economic value nationwide and reduces dependency on government aid.

Investing in these programs enables us to … [a couple of sentences of details and why it is important].

AmeriCorps is delivering results, and it has earned strong community support nationwide. In [locality name], AmeriCorps is getting things done. I urge our congressional delegation to recognize the importance of this beloved program and ensure it remains a priority for future funding.

[Name]
[City, State]
[Email]
[Phone number]
[Some outlets may also ask for your title and organization]

Appendix V: Example Op-Ed

Use this op-ed as an example when writing your own. Note that this op-ed is from last year, and information in op-ed may reflect FY24 Congressional budget.

We served with Vet Corps. We saw it save lives. We need to expand it.
By Anthony Sandoval and Eric Burns
November 10, 2024

https://www.theolympian.com/opinion/op-ed/article295257979.html

Each November, we talk a lot about how we need to improve support for America's veterans. We lament over high suicide rates and the many barriers preventing veterans from accessing care.

Vet Corps is a group that does more than just talk and lament — they act. We know because we served with them, and we experienced how their work saves lives.

Vet Corps, an AmeriCorps program coordinated by the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, embeds veterans and individuals from military families on campuses to connect with fellow veterans and help them navigate their transition into civilian life. Vet Corps members host gatherings, help other veterans access resources, and facilitate workshops on academic habits and "learning how to learn."

Vet Corps positions are funded by AmeriCorps through Serve Washington and include a living allowance, professional development, and an education award.

As two veterans and alumni of Vet Corps, we understand this program's power. We remember the community we built, marked by joyful events, service projects, and mutual support. But we also remember harder days, like when a student veteran suddenly vanished off the grid, refusing contact with loved ones. Or when a Marine Corps veteran started struggling, but put up walls against anyone trying to help.

As veterans, we don't need an explanation for these behaviors — we already understand. In the military, background aside, you're part of a unit; you share the same mission, challenges, and rigid schedule. Some of us shared the same traumas and saw the same horrific things. Being launched from a cohesive unit abroad to a college campus back home, where your experience is rare, can feel like whiplash.

This whiplash feeling impacted us both.

One of us came home with severe survivor's guilt; the haunting imagery from a deployment in Afghanistan left no room for joy, leaving instead only PTSD and suicidal ideation.

One of us came home from Iraq and tried to replace the structure and physicality of the service with football, struggled with drinking, and did not form a memory for eight years, due to the confluence of pressure on the body and mind.

We were both searching for purpose, seeking community, and grappling with complicated feelings about the service. We were each referred to our campus centers for military support — one of us at Pacific Lutheran University, and one of us at Wenatchee Valley College.

There, we connected with Vet Corps, which saved both our lives. It afforded us the opportunity to find meaning and service post-military. Our mentors encouraged us to try ideas informed by our own experiences and talents. We connected with hundreds of other veterans who needed someone who spoke their language to help them find their path. We found belonging and purpose.

For 15 years, federal funding through AmeriCorps has supported 600 Vet Corps members, including 41 who served last year. These members have improved, and even saved, the lives of thousands of veterans.

This year, funding constraints led to a reduction in Vet Corps' footprint. While there have been calls to increase funding for AmeriCorps so it can continue supporting programs like Vet Corps, the agency has not received the increase to meet nationwide needs.

Today, we both work for the Washington Department of Veteran Affairs with the SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program. Vet Corps offered us a chance to give back on campus, and later opened doors for us to secure permanent, meaningful employment that allows us to continue our service and live out our purpose.

This Veterans Day, we share gratitude for the strong community we found through Vet Corps, and we are proud of the impact of our service in Washington. We share a hope that in the future, AmeriCorps programs like Vet Corps will exist across every county in every state, so there is a home for more of these communities, and we can continue having each other's backs here at home.

Anthony Sandoval and Eric Burns are staff with SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Program at Washington Department of Veterans Affairs and AmeriCorps alumni with Vet Corps.

# # #

Appendix VI: Template Op-Ed

Below is a template for an op-ed using [TOWN NAME] as a placeholder for the local community. The listed author of an op-ed should ideally be one (or two, in co-authorship) recognizable names in the community, such as the head of a community-based organization, a businessperson, or a religious leader. You may also want to consider asking a local elected official to author an op-ed – such as your mayor, a city councilor, county executive, school board member, etc. Op-eds are typically around 750 words in length, but your intended publication can confirm its expectation on word count and other requirements.

Sample Headline: Without AmeriCorps, [*TOWN NAME*] Will Suffer

1. Open with one to three paragraphs that emphasize the tangible impact of AmeriCorps in the region; this could include:
    - **Anecdotes** about one or two people whose lives were made better because of your local AmeriCorps program.
        - Ideally the piece should include the names of these individuals, quotes from them and other third-party validators. For example: If discussing the impact of an after-school program on a student, quoted individuals could include the parent, the student's teacher, and the AmeriCorps member whose service resulted in the positive change.
    - **Data**: Wherever possible, cite specific impact data that backs up the anecdotal evidence. For example: a school may be able to affirm improved attendance records, test scores, etc.

2. Next, connect these stories to the broader narrative from the region/program and, wherever possible, connect back to national data on AmeriCorps' impact on the same issues. If you need help finding national data, contact Voices.
    - Connect to your state: Consider citing other AmeriCorps programs across the state that are fulfilling similar local needs. Access state-specific data on National Service in your state, including details on the full scope of AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors presence in your state from February 2024 to February 2025.
    - Connect nationally: Use national statistics that relate to the op-ed topic. For example, if you are writing an op-ed related to education, you could note that, "Nearly 36,000 AmeriCorps members serve annually at more than 9,500 K-12 schools. Additionally, AmeriCorps Seniors tutor and mentor over 90,000 children each year."

3. The concluding paragraph should re-emphasize the call to action and work in AmeriCorps' messages.
    - For example, "Without AmeriCorps, the children in our town will be hungrier and our environment will be more polluted. Congress is facing challenging budgetary decisions, but Congressman Smith and all other members of Congress must invest in AmeriCorps to ensure that our community doesn't lose necessary resources and supports. AmeriCorps is one of the best decisions Congress can make to increase local impact on critical challenges; every $1 Congress invests in AmeriCorps returns more than $17 in benefits to local communities. Our congressional delegation can help ensure that investment comes to [*TOWN NAME*] by fully funding AmeriCorps."

Appendix VII: Template Letter to Your Member of Congress

Dear [*MEMBER OF CONGRESS NAME*],

We are writing on behalf of [*ORGANIZATION NAME(S)],* located in [*DISTRICT/STATE*], to convey the value of AmeriCorps to our community and to ask you to protect and support this vital program.

[INSERT 2-3 SENTENCES ABOUT YOUR ORGANIZATION:

- *Provide a brief description of your program or organization, with a link to any public-facing website.*
- *Explain how AmeriCorps funding or AmeriCorps members help your organization deliver tangible impact in the state or congressional district; i.e. "Because of AmeriCorps, we are able to…"*
- *Use relevant data and statistics to show the benefits your program provides to the community.]*

[*ORGANIZATION NAME*] is just one of many local organizations harnessing the power of AmeriCorps members to help address some of our region's most pressing social and economic challenges. Across [*STATE*], there are [#] AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors working hand-in-hand with local partners to respond to natural disasters, tutor students, support veterans and military families, combat hunger and homelessness, fight the opioid epidemic, help seniors live independently, and much more.

AmeriCorps is one of the best investments the federal government can make. AmeriCorps grants and service members provide our community organizations with the people power that we need to solve local challenges, and, unlike most federal grant programs, AmeriCorps grants are matched by funds from private, philanthropic, and local sources. Economists have found that this efficient public-private partnership yields more than $17 in benefits for every $1 invested by Congress.

AmeriCorps is a proven, cost-effective, and popular program and is making a tangible difference in [*CITY/REGION/STATE*]. [*ADD A SENTENCE(S) EXPLAINING WHY PROTECTING AMERICORPS IS ESSENTIAL TO YOUR COMMUNITY*.]

We understand that Congress is facing challenging budget decisions, but we hope you will support the federal investment in AmeriCorps, so our community can continue to count on AmeriCorps for help where it's needed most.

Sincerely,
[*NAME, TITLE, ORGANIZATION*]
[*NAME, TITLE, ORGANIZATION*]
[*NAME, TITLE, ORGANIZATION*]