



# WA COVID RESPONSE CORPS

*OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL  
AND EARLY LEARNINGS*

MARCH 2021 | SCHULTZ FAMILY FOUNDATION



**Serve Washington, the Washington State Department of Agriculture, and the Schultz Family Foundation have collaborated to create the WA COVID Response Corps, an AmeriCorps program designed to respond to unprecedented levels of food insecurity across the State of Washington.**

**This paper outlines key elements of the model and early program implementation learnings.**

## **BACKGROUND**



Since the U.S. onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, there has been a heightened level of food insecurity nationally, including in Washington state. Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimated in Spring 2020 that 24 million households (11 percent of all households) did not have enough to eat. In Washington state, the University of Washington estimated that as many as 30 percent of households were food insecure, with persons of color 1.5 times more likely to be food insecure than white people.

Food distribution systems also have been severely impacted by the pandemic. The nation's food security infrastructure has long relied on large and small nonprofits, powered

in large part by volunteers – most of whom fall into COVID-19 'high risk' groups – to collect and distribute food to communities in need. The closure of schools, which has reduced access to low- or no-cost meals for young people, and pressure on the nonprofit food security infrastructure has become even more acute. State governments have scrambled to purchase food, and local nonprofits have struggled to respond to community need due to a reduced volunteer force. Many states, including Washington, mobilized the National Guard to support food supply and distribution operations. With unprecedented need requiring additional human capacity, challenges with recruiting and managing volunteers, and few resources to hire additional staff, the Schultz Family Foundation began to explore how AmeriCorps could help build capacity in Washington state's food security infrastructure to respond to the need created by COVID-19.

At the same time, the pandemic-driven economic downturn and interruptions to postsecondary education and the workforce left many young people in need of meaningful opportunities. According to Mathematica, in Spring 2020, the national youth unemployment rate was 18.5%, approximately twice as high as the year prior. In the greater Seattle area, youth unemployment rates nearly tripled.

In 2019, AmeriCorps federal funding supported 2,100 AmeriCorps positions in Washington, but fewer than 15 of those AmeriCorps members were placed in food banks. By June 2020, AmeriCorps had pivoted to deploy short-term resources to address the COVID-19 food insecurity crisis, but these resources were set to expire at the end of the program year in July 2020. At that point, a dual gap emerged: nonprofits addressing food insecurity, many of which had not been formal AmeriCorps host sites, faced significant ongoing staffing challenges in responding to COVID-19-induced economic disruptions; at the same time, other nonprofits that had traditionally hosted AmeriCorps members appeared unable to continue normal operations because of school closures and fundraising challenges, likely leaving a significant number of the state's AmeriCorps positions unfilled for the 2020-21 program year.




***PERSONS OF COLOR ARE***

**1.5X MORE  
LIKELY**

***TO BE FOOD INSECURE  
THAN WHITE PEOPLE***

Source: University of Washington,  
2020 Washington State  
Food Security Survey



## THE MODEL

The Schultz Family Foundation (the Foundation), established in 1996 by Howard and Sheri Schultz, invests in innovative solutions and partnerships that unlock the potential of young people and strengthen communities. The Foundation has long believed in the potential of national service as a two-pronged tool to address the nation's challenges by driving social impact while expanding opportunities for youth who are low-income, Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). The Foundation partnered with Serve Washington, a state commission that advances national service, volunteerism, and civic engagement. Together, the Foundation and Serve Washington conceived the WA COVID Response Corps in response to the needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. The model is designed to:

- 1 Target human capital resources to a high-need sector, specifically food distribution, to create greater impact and demonstrate the value of AmeriCorps members concentrating efforts in a single sector.
- 2 Encourage new nonprofits to participate in the program – and enable nonprofits that previously had AmeriCorps members but were facing fundraising challenges – by underwriting 75 percent of the

“host site fee” nonprofits generally pay to fund an AmeriCorps member on site. By doing so, Washington was able to prevent a significant reduction in the use of AmeriCorps slots.

- 3 Engage and support a high percentage of youth who reflect the income, racial, and ethnic diversity of the communities in which they serve by increasing the stipend to 80 percent of the living wage in their county of service, making an assistance fund available to address short-term emergencies, and arming members with new skills, experiences, and networks to build on post-service. This stipend increase raised living allowances by \$1,500 in low cost-of-living areas and by \$10,873 in higher cost-of-living areas like King County.



**THIS PROGRAM IS  
IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT  
WILL GIVE BACK TO OUR  
COMMUNITY FOR YEARS  
AND YEARS TO COME."**

**- MERCEDES, AGE 20  
CORPS MEMBER, COWLITZ COUNTY**

Serve Washington has integrated the model into the state's AmeriCorps program. In its first year, the Foundation is underwriting 75 percent of the host site fee, augmenting professional development for Corps members, supplementing the AmeriCorps stipend to enable participants from lower-income families to participate, offering an emergency-assistance fund to members facing financial hardship in completing their service, and developing a data platform where all stakeholders can assess impact by initiative, region, and host site.

  
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**WE LOST OUR ENTIRE  
VOLUNTEER FORCE DUE  
TO THE PANDEMIC.  
WITHOUT OUR TWO  
RESPONSE CORPS  
MEMBERS, WE WOULD  
NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE  
TO CONTINUE ALL OUR  
SERVICES."**

*- HOST SITE SUPERVISOR*



## PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

In August 2020, Serve Washington and the Foundation issued a request for proposals (RFP) to develop a youth service corps for people between the ages of 17 and 25 in the State of Washington. The RFP stated that the Corps would deploy up to 100 AmeriCorps members during the 2020-21 service year to work on projects associated with alleviating food insecurity.

The RFP was distributed to existing state and national AmeriCorps programs operating in Washington state. Respondents were asked to share how they would recruit and support host sites focused on food insecurity, particularly those serving the most vulnerable, as well as young people between the ages of 17 and 25. Respondents' proposals were reviewed by a team comprised of former AmeriCorps members, young people, and representatives from Serve Washington and the Foundation. Four organizations were selected as grantees: Common Threads Farm, Life Works, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), and Washington Service Corps. In total, these respondents expected to field 100 Corps members at 37 sites in 14 counties across Washington state.

More than one-third of the host sites were first-time participants in AmeriCorps, and

one-fourth would not have been able to participate without the Foundation's fee contribution because of financial hardship.

Six weeks after the start of the program, the Washington Department of Agriculture, citing the need across the food-security infrastructure, made an additional investment to field 25 more Corps members through the Washington Service Corps, for a total of 125 funded slots for the WA COVID Response Corps.

The Foundation is working with four additional organizations to support the Corps. These include:

### + **EDQUITY**

A technical platform designed to quickly distribute emergency cash assistance to young people based on an assessment of a young person's needs. Initially designed to be used at public colleges, Edquity adapted its platform for use in an AmeriCorps environment.

### + **INNOVIA FOUNDATION**

A community foundation supporting the participation of three nonprofit organizations in Eastern Washington in the WA COVID Response Corps. In addition to identifying organizations interested in participating in the initiative, the Innovia Foundation is underwriting the host site fee for these three organizations.

**+ SISGI**

A youth training organization that designed an approach to professional development to strengthen Corps members' understanding of food insecurity issues and their intersection with equity issues, as well as build their skills in storytelling, social change, leadership, and communication. SISGI's work will culminate in a capstone project in which Corps members will share insights from their service across social media platforms.

**+ UPMETRICS**

A data-collaboration tool that enables partners to aggregate data across host sites so that all stakeholders can track the progress of the initiative.

The program officially kicked off November 1, 2020, with more than 90 Corps members recruited, growing to a total of 120 Corps members three months later. From inception to February 28, 2021, Corps members have delivered 23.8 million pounds of food and 4.7 million meals, serving more than 1,000,000 people across the state.



***I WANTED TO BE ABLE TO HELP OTHERS AND BRING RELIEF TO THEM, ESPECIALLY IN THESE DIFFICULT TIMES. EVEN BY HELPING TO BRING THEM FOOD, IT RELIEVES STRESS AND CAN IMPROVE THEIR DAY."***

***- MARGARITA, AGE 17  
CORPS MEMBER, WHATCOM COUNTY***

## PRELIMINARY LEARNINGS



Given the unique program design that leveraged both private and public dollars to quickly respond to a pandemic, we have identified six key learnings during the initial implementation period. These include:

### 1. AMERICORPS, AND NATIONAL SERVICE MORE GENERALLY, IS UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO RESPOND TO A MOMENT OF CRISIS.

AmeriCorps, because of its relationships, existing infrastructure and funding stream, was able to respond to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis relatively quickly.

AmeriCorps grantees were able to quickly engage a network of food banks, community farms, and meal-distribution sites with significant staffing needs. The grantees were able to recruit AmeriCorps members to fill that need.

Even so, AmeriCorps is a complicated program, with regulations and paperwork that can limit the program's flexibility. Serve Washington's leadership was able to navigate this complex system – and was willing to quickly partner with a philanthropic foundation in a new way – to create and launch the WA COVID Response Corps.



#### RECOMMENDATION

**Empower state AmeriCorps leaders to attract new partners and deploy resources quickly to respond as needed to emerging local crises.**



## 2. INTENTIONALLY ENGAGING WITH MULTIPLE SUB-GRANTEES CREATES A DIVERSE NETWORK OF NONPROFITS IN THE RESPONSE CORPS.

The jointly-issued RFP cast a wide net in engaging a diverse set of existing AmeriCorps sub-grantees in addressing unprecedented levels of food insecurity. Those grantees were then able to tap into existing and new relationships to build a network of host sites focused on food insecurity. The number of food insecurity-focused organizations, such as food banks that became host sites, grew from six in 2019 to more than 70 under the WA COVID Response Corps. The host site fee subsidy made participation in the WA COVID Response Corps a feasible way to address their pandemic-induced operational challenges.

Not all host sites interested in participating in the program actually became active host sites though. During the recruitment period, grantees had nearly a third of host sites demonstrate initial interest but did not ultimately join the initiative. This was in part due to the limited administration and human resources capacity of many host sites, the relatively complicated application process potential AmeriCorps host sites must complete, and the difficulty in recruiting AmeriCorps members from their communities to serve in their organizations. While the host site fee was subsidized, there was no additional capacity offered to host sites' operations teams, and many of them were overwhelmed.

### RECOMMENDATION

**When sub-grantees use their networks to bring in new, smaller host sites into the AmeriCorps program, offering some centralized human resources technical assistance may reduce the learning curve and enable more host sites to successfully participate.**

### 3. INCORPORATING NEW PARTNERS REQUIRES SOME FLEXIBILITY IN THE DESIGNED MODEL.

When the WA COVID Response Corps launched, private and public leaders from across the state were eager to support the effort as an effective way to address food insecurity. When the Department of Agriculture invested additional dollars to expand the Corps, all considered it a significant win. That investment enabled the Corps to reach 12 additional host sites.

When the Department of Agriculture came on as a partner, Serve Washington and the Foundation agreed that the same key performance indicators would be used to measure impact, and that the added Corps members would have access to the

emergency assistance fund as well as ongoing professional development. As a public agency, though, the Department of Agriculture could not specify the preferred age of Corps members, allowing its grantee and host sites to recruit Corps members of all ages.

#### RECOMMENDATION

**When assessing the cost-benefit of adding additional partners, prioritize which elements of the program are critical. In this case, our primary goal was addressing food insecurity; the expansion of opportunities to vulnerable young people in the state was a secondary goal.**

## 4. AMERICORPS CAN ADAPT TO ADDRESS CRISES, BUT ITS COMPLEX STRUCTURE CAN POSE PROGRAM CHALLENGES.

Serve Washington's vision and willingness to create a highly responsive model that leveraged the existing AmeriCorps infrastructure while supplementing the program with additional dollars enabled the Response Corps to be larger and launch more quickly than if the Foundation had created a new standalone service initiative.

While the program was able to start without delay, the fact that it was linked to a complex existing program made some elements of the program difficult. Nearly all of the newly recruited food banks reported struggling with the complexities of the application process to join the program and some eligible organizations who were interested were so overwhelmed, they never enrolled.

Those who did join were often left to recruit potential Corps members on their own, without the benefit of a larger recruitment effort publicizing opportunities in their communities. This was because the standard recruitment period for AmeriCorps members' participation is from April through June; this program did not begin recruitment until September. Finally, young people interested in the program, especially those without a college degree, were faced with a complex application and enrollment process. Grantees, who had been given target recruitment figures based on the racial and income diversity in the communities in which they were serving, still had to operate within complex application and enrollment processes, which may have hindered equitable youth participation, rather than supported it.

### RECOMMENDATION

**Innovating within an existing government program leverages resources that enable service initiatives to reach scale more quickly than it would otherwise. Identifying limitations of a program, and supplementing as needed, will enable the public/private partnership to meet ambitious goals.**

## 5. PHILANTHROPIC INVESTMENTS SHOULD BE STRUCTURED TO PLAY THE ROLE OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PARTNER FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR.

Because philanthropic investments should rightly be able to take on more risk than their public sector counterparts, the model was designed to enable the Foundation to engage entrepreneurial social-impact organizations to contribute key components of the project. At its most effective, philanthropic dollars can and should be used to pilot new ideas, such as bringing in innovative models or partners that the public sector, which is inherently more risk averse, can learn from and adopt as appropriate. In this case, the Foundation was able to bring a relatively new emergency cash distribution partner and a data-sharing partner to the effort.

These innovations are not without their own learnings. While each partner has the potential to add significant value to the project and the service field more generally, the implementation has enabled us to continue to refine these models and improve their effectiveness before they are ready for scale. For example, Edquity had never worked with an AmeriCorps program before, so identifying how to access and distribute emergency cash was a new challenge. Host sites had never used electronic reporting forms, so developing methodologies to automate and standardize data collection tools took time and plenty of quality assurance.

### RECOMMENDATION

**While integrating new models into existing programs can bring challenges, it is often the most important role a philanthropic partner can play. The process of identifying, securing, and overseeing the piloting of these models enables public and nonprofit stakeholders – many with less capacity and fewer resources – to assess the effectiveness and future applicability of these models with little, if any, financial risk.**

## 6. PRIORITIZING EQUITY IN RECRUITING IS CRITICAL BUT INSUFFICIENT IN CREATING A MORE DIVERSE CORPS.

A key element of the WA COVID Response Corps is to improve equity – of the Corps members composition, of the host sites, and of the grantees. This work has included providing an increased living allowance and setting clear recruitment thresholds for all sub-grantees reflecting the racial and economic diversity in the communities of service as well as an assessment of where and how host sites are recruited, where and how AmeriCorps members themselves are recruited, and whether the AmeriCorps program itself, given the stipend and required service hours, can be modified to improve equity-oriented outcomes.

Because the RFP highlighted the Corps' focus on equity and demographic thresholds, all selected grantees entered the program aware of this imperative. That said, committing to

equity and successfully executing a program equitably are not synonymous. The latter requires time to build new relationships, assess existing practices, and make changes that expand how and who AmeriCorps programs are serving. While the compressed timeline made meaningful advancements difficult, the quality of the conversations and training leave us optimistic that there is momentum to bring a greater equity lens to AmeriCorps programs.

### RECOMMENDATION

**Meaningful advances in equity – whether how host sites are familiarized into and supported in the program or where and how recruiting channels are built with community-based partners – require meaningful changes to an organization's standard operating procedures. Giving organizations access to tools and training and the financial resources to support the internal operations to make these changes is critical to building more equitable AmeriCorps programs.**

Learn more at

***COVIDRESPONSECORPS.ORG***

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