



# Sierra Nevada AmeriCorps Partnership SNAP Program Evaluation

Conducted November 2014

## **Evaluation Introduction:**

In an effort to ensure continuous improvement of the Sierra Nevada AmeriCorps Partnership (SNAP), the Sierra Nevada Alliance and its partners conducted an internal and external evaluation. This evaluation is conducted once during every three-year cycle of the program. SNAP Program Staff and Sierra Nevada Alliance Executive Staff completed the internal evaluation. The external evaluation was conducted in order to gain additional evaluation and feedback and was solicited from all SNAP Host Sites as well as program partners. Twenty-three host sites and program partners responded to the poll in November 2014 and their responses are included in the Evaluation Results below.

## **Primary Evaluators:**

Gavin Feiger, Sierra Nevada Alliance Acting Executive Director

Lynn Baumgartner, SNAP Program Director

Cami Chavez, Sierra Nevada Alliance Financial Manager

## **Secondary Evaluators: (Host Site Staff and Program Partners)**

Marty Coleman-Hunt & Cathy Shirley, Bear Yuba Land Trust

Joanne Hild & Justin Wood, Sierra Streams Institute

Mark Drew, California Trout Eastern Sierra

Steve Haze, San Joaquin Valley Leadership Forum

Jonathan Kusel, Sierra Institute for Community and Environment

Bridget Fithian, Sierra Foothills Conservancy

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David Lass, Trout Unlimited Truckee Chapter

Jesse Patterson, The League to Save Lake Tahoe  
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Kerry Morse, The Sierra Fund  
Rachel Hutchinson, South Yuba River Citizens League  
Danna Stroud, Sierra Nevada Conservancy  
Anne Murphy, Shasta Land Trust  
Bud Darwin, Sequoia Riverlands Trust  
Mark Egbert, El Dorado and Georgetown Divide Resource Conservation Districts  
Elena Delacy, American River Conservancy  
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Sam Rossi, Butte County Resource Conservation District  
Brian Adkins & BryAnna Vaughan, Bishop Paiute Tribe  
Julie Fair & Luke Hunt, American Rivers Nevada City  
Sarah Green, Alpine Watershed Group  
Andrew Schurr, Friends of the Inyo  
Karen Schambach, Center for Sierra Nevada Conservation

**Program Period Evaluated:** October 2011 – November 2014

<b>Evaluation Question</b>
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How has the SNAP program implemented the five CaliforniaVolunteers program standards during its third funding cycle and what impact has that implementation had on the program's ability to meet the primary goals of AmeriCorps?

The five CaliforniaVolunteers program standards are:

1. Strong Organization—Strong Collaborative
2. Needs and Service Design
3. AmeriCorps Member Design
4. Community Involvement Design
5. Program Design is Effective

### Primary Goals of AmeriCorps:

- *Getting Things Done.* AmeriCorps helps communities meet needs in the areas of education, public safety, the environment, and other human needs through direct and demonstrable service.
- *Strengthening Communities.* AmeriCorps builds the capacity of community organizations and other institutions to more effectively engage community volunteers to improve our communities.
- *Encouraging Responsibility.* Through service and civic education, AmeriCorps members become agents of community solutions and develop an ethic of lifelong service.
- *Expanding Opportunity.* AmeriCorps helps those who help America. Members develop professional skills, gain invaluable experience and receive education awards for education or job training

## Evaluation Method

Using the CaliforniaVolunteers program standards, evaluators looked at strengths and not-strengths of the program, with particular focus on how meeting or failing to meet the program standards is impacting the effectiveness of the SNAP program in reaching AmeriCorps goals. The internal evaluation was conducted by SNAP and Alliance staffs using interviews, records reviews, and program knowledge. The external review was conducted using an online survey tool. The results are separated and presented below in the Evaluation Results.

## Evaluation Results

### Summary of Evaluation Results

#### Standard 1: Strong Organization – Strong Collaborative:

- Strengths overview: SNAP and Alliance staffs' experience and dedication result in an efficiently and professionally run program; and 93% of external reviewers agree.
- Areas for Improvement: The program could support and encourage host sites and program partners to conduct community surveys in order to assess the visibility and perception of the AmeriCorps Members, program, and projects. The program could also work on designing a performance measure for monitoring and assessment.

#### Standard 2: Needs & Services

- Strengths overview: SNAP excelled in selecting and managing host sites and in creating high quality AmeriCorps positions and recruiting outstanding members. Through national service over the last 8 years, the program has mobilized over 200 members and tens of thousands of volunteers in the field to address the massive need for watershed restoration in the Sierra that would otherwise go unmet; and 89% of external reviewers agree.
- Areas for Improvement: During the next three-year cycle, the program would like to work with CV to develop a Performance Measure for assessment and monitoring, for which there is an enormous demand for services in the Sierra.

#### Standard 3: AmeriCorps Member Design

- Strengths overview: The program's enrollment and retention rates are clear testaments to the program's success with the AmeriCorps Member Design standard. The orientation, training, and supervision processes and activities efficiently and thoroughly prepare the members for service; and 93% of external reviewers agree.
- Areas for Improvement: Member recruitment is one of the best selling points, but based on external review, Native American colleges and programs could be targeted.

#### Standard 4: Community Involvement Design

- Strengths overview: Over the last eight years, SNAP members have recruited and supported tens of thousands of volunteers to be stewards of Sierra watersheds. Members are well trained in volunteer management, support, and appreciation thanks to program, Alliance, and host site staffs; and 95% of external reviewers agree.
- Areas for Improvement: The program could have a greater focus on media efforts, including encouraging and supporting host sites to conduct media outreach in their communities and watersheds.

#### Standard 5: Program Design is Effective

- Strengths overview: All reviews are very effective as evidenced by our greatly successful programs, projects, communications, results tracking, and compliance; and 78% of external reviewers agree.
- Areas for Improvement: During the results review stage, the program can work more closely with the program partners to conduct more thorough review of program outcomes and identify continuous improvement strategies, instead of just relying on internal review and unrequested partnership feedback.

## Detailed Evaluation Results

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### 1. Strong Organization – Strong Collaborative

**Overview and Internal Review:** The Sierra Nevada AmeriCorps Partnership (SNAP) benefits greatly from the long running expertise and strong administrative support of the Sierra Nevada Alliance, which just celebrated its twentieth anniversary. The SNAP program is lead by a Program Director with four years of experience with the program and the Sierra Nevada Alliance's Acting Executive Director who has worked with the program for the last three years.

The Alliance employs a Financial Manager with decades of experience. Sierra Nevada Alliance complies with all CaliforniaVolunteers policy and procedure requirements. The Alliance uses the standard accounting practices, using Quick books for non-profits, we track every line item separate as budgeted, tracking each line item by individual grant or as unrestricted income/expenses. The Alliance undergoes an annual independent Audit, with a licensed Auditor every single year to stay in compliance. Supporting documentation is maintained for all expenditures and we put copies of all expenditures in the grant file. There is a separate bank account for matching funds and money is transferred into the operating account when the matching funds are earned on a monthly basis. All Grantee-provided cash and in-kind expenses are documented. The Alliance maintains signed time and attendance records for each employee. All service hours are recorded and signed by the member and supervisors. The Member Living Allowance payments are dispersed within the allowable range. The Alliance provides health care to all members, and provides childcare as needed. There are signed contracts with all consultants/subcontractors, and payments stay within the maximum rate for consultants. The Alliance signs individual Memoranda of Understanding with all partners. Fiscal staff has been trained and is aware of pertinent AmeriCorps rules, regulations, provision, and procedures. The PERs and FSRs are submitted on time. In addition to the strong foundation the Alliance provides, the program's focus on collaboration and strong, long-term partners provide another important key to success. The SNAP program relies heavily on its Hosts Site partners for member management, financial support, training, and program design input. Program partners are involved with orientations, trainings, and graduation and they meet via conference call to discuss issues as they arise. Partners have a good understanding of the program design, requirements, restrictions, and the focus of SNAP Member Service. Partners understand how member service activities are tied to SNAP performance measures as well as CaliforniaVolunteers and AmeriCorps missions, goals, and objectives. Partners provide input on how best to address the community need in the Sierra and are the best resources for determining highest need beneficiaries and best intervention methods in their particular region of the Sierra. Partners are also well versed in AmeriCorps rules and regulations and have been especially diligent with ensuring members are not participating in AmeriCorps prohibited activities on their service time. In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> year of the program, SNAP Staff has implemented new effective policies to ensure timesheets are accurate and submitted on time. The biggest improvement the

program has seen in during this grant cycle in this program standard has been in timesheet management. SNAP has started using an online timesheet service, America Learns which has greatly increased the efficiency and accuracy of our timesheet process. SNAP has also started using an online file sharing service that is automatically backed up for members uploading paperwork and monthly results which has been very successful in ensuring paperwork is turned in on time monthly and not lost in the mail.

**Details from External Review:**

95% of reviewers agree or strongly agree that the SNAP program's mission and design match the vision and objectives of their organization. Two quotes: “My expectations from SNAP were exceeded. Our SNAP member in the last year accomplished so much for us!” “The SNAP program brings the most significant infusion of committed, energetic human resources to our region's rural communities. This is directly in line with our mission as an organization, and a great benefit to the small communities of our region, that aren't otherwise able to tap this caliber of individuals.” Constructive comments focused on the amount of bureaucracy and paperwork required and noted that not all conservation and restoration programs fit neatly into boxes.

91% of reviewers agree or strongly agree that SNAP and the Sierra Nevada Alliance manages and administers the SNAP program in a way that addresses host sites’ needs. A quote “SNAP and The Alliance have created a great program that brings talented people to our organization every year. Their member recruitment and support strategies are awesome, and we reap the benefits from their hard work.” The only constructive comment indicated that the schedule is difficult – members starting at the end of field season and leaving before the field season ends.

**Areas for Improvement:** One potential area of improvement would be to support and encourage host sites and program partners to conduct community surveys in order to assess the visibility and perception of the AmeriCorps Members, program, and projects. In the coming three-year cycle, the program, the Alliance, and partners must focus on creating a sustainability plan for a transition from AmeriCorps to non-AmeriCorps service delivery, or a combination of the two. This effort is part of the Alliance’s 2014 Strategic Plan and there has been a fair amount of brainstorming with committed partners. The SNAP program is very popular throughout the Sierra Nevada region and we believe a sustainable program with long-term funding can be designed and supported. Responding to external reviewers, although we unfortunately cannot change the schedule, we can continue to improve our performance measures to even more

closely match the important work our host sites are doing to protect and restore Sierra watersheds. The idea of trying to add a PM for monitoring and assessment is discussed elsewhere in this evaluation and will be pursued in the next cycle, especially considering “assessment” is part of an existing PM in name but not in practice.

**Impact on Achieving AmeriCorps Goals:** The program has streamlined enrollment, background checks, and the recruitment process in general to ensure that positions are filled at the beginning of the service year so members can be effectively trained and start addressing the community need as soon as possible. Members do not spend time on prohibited activities and are solely focused on SNAP performance measures. By having a strong partnership and collaborative relationship with SNAP sites, the SNAP program has a better sense of what is needed on the ground in the different Sierra communities the SNAP program serves. The expertise provided by the strong supporting organization in areas such as communications, web design, volunteer recruitment, watershed science, education, and restoration, and event planning help members design and implement projects to best serve their Host Site community. Program and Partnership staffs wholeheartedly believe in national and community service and emphasize the value of the members’ service. We have a very high retention rate and many members serve multiple terms in the SNAP program. Partnership members understand that member mentorship is an extremely important part of the SNAP program and a benefit that the program strives for every member to receive. The program does a thorough review process of all potential Host Sites to ensure that they have the ability to provide mentorship. This mentorship helps members develop professionally and provides guidance on the member’s next steps after AmeriCorps. Strong program and financial controls along with support and vigilance over Host Sites’ monitoring and reporting protocols help the program to ensure that all members will reach their hour requirement in order to receive their education awards.

## **2. Needs and Services**

**Overview and Internal Review:** With renewed emphasis on recruiting returning host sites, the program has been able to improve its processes for providing interventions appropriate to the specific beneficiaries identified through the host site selection process. This effort supports our host site selection process, which was greatly improved during the previous three-year cycle due to the Program Evaluation Report process. The quality of supervision members have received is

reflected in the program's high retention rates as well as the members' positive feedback to SNAP staff about their experience at their host site. The past eight years of the program has also clearly shown that national service has been an excellent strategy to address the watershed restoration needs in the Sierra. There is a huge need for this work in the Sierra as evidenced by the number of impaired water bodies in the region and various restoration and monitoring plans not being implemented. What has been missing is the mechanism to put people into the field to get the necessary work done. Through national service, the program has been able to get over 200 members and tens of thousands of volunteers in the field over the last eight years to address this massive need for watershed restoration in the Sierra that would otherwise go unmet.

**Details from External Review:**

91% of reviewers agree or strongly agree that the SNAP program identifies high need beneficiaries - watersheds, communities, organizations in most need of help in our region. A quote: "The SNAP program greatly improves the capacity of many small Sierra conservation organizations." No constructive comments submitted.

87% of reviewers agree or strongly agree that the SNAP program's methods [interventions] are appropriate to address the gap in watershed restoration & assessment and environmental education needs in our region. A constructive comment: "The current project metrics do not account for valuable contributions to assessment (despite it being stated as a program goal) and large scale restoration (eg. beyond hand labor) that the SNAP member may contribute to."

89% of reviewers agree or strongly agree that National service (AmeriCorps) is the best strategy to meet the gap in watershed restoration & assessment and environmental education needs in our region. A quote: "AmeriCorps provides exceptional hands on experience that benefits the needs of our watershed while also providing members with career-ready skills." Constructive comments focused on needing long-term staffing solutions for watershed education and restoration, for example: "Although the best way to address this need would be sustainable living wage jobs dedicated to it, in the absence of that possibility, National Service is the next best alternative."

**Areas for Improvement:** While the program did work with experts in the restoration field to rework the SNAP Assessment Protocol in 2013 to ensure that the data is as accurate as possible and useful to SNAP, CaliforniaVolunteers (CV), and academics and resource managers working in the Sierra, we have not found a way to address the issue of monitoring. With the prevalence of

“adaptive management” principles, both in policy and in funding requirements, assessment and monitoring has become a necessary and required aspect of nearly all restoration projects. SNAP collects much of the assessment and monitoring efforts conducted by members, but is only able to report those activities in narrative sections of reports to CV. During the next three-year cycle, the program would like to work with CV to develop a Performance Measure for assessment and monitoring, for which there is an enormous demand for services in the Sierra. Our external review supports this idea for improvement – monitoring and assessment should have a performance measure.

**Impact on Achieving AmeriCorps Goals:** By having a strong Needs and Service Design the program is able to ensure that not only does it ‘get things done’ but it gets what it says it will get done and in an effective and efficient way. The program has had documented success completing watershed restoration and assessment across the Sierra as well as educating and engaging community volunteers to be stewards of the Sierra. The Needs and Service Design has also expanded opportunities for AmeriCorps members to gain experience in the environmental field and given them the skills and experience needed to gain employment in this highly competitive field. Many SNAP members serve multiple terms of national service through the program and nearly all of our host sites say they would hire their member on if that had the funds; and nearly every year at least one site does have the funds and does hire a member on as staff after their term of service ends.

### **3. AmeriCorps Member Design**

**Overview and Internal Review:** The program’s enrollment and retention rates are clear testaments to the program’s success with the AmeriCorps Member Design standard. The program’s recruitment process has been extremely successful and generates on average seven applicants for each available position. The member selection process is a very time intensive process for the program but well worth the effort. The two step process the program utilizes ensures that all members meet AmeriCorps standards, understand what is involved in being a part of an AmeriCorps program, and also are good fit for individual sites. The program dedicates the five days to orientation to the program and AmeriCorps. During this time, SNAP Staff cover essential information regarding prohibited activities, member reporting, timesheets, policies and procedures, volunteer management, AmeriCorps and National Service history, harassment

policies, and the calendar for the year among other topics. In addition each member is trained at their specific site on project specific topics such as Geographic Information Systems software and environmental education strategies. The SNAP program also hosts two additional multi-day trainings with service projects throughout the year. The time invested in recruiting and training members have resulted in well-trained members who have high quality experience. The program provides direct member supervision through regular and as-needed check-ins and evaluations. Program staff visits each host site at least once per year in order to spend a day in the member's shoes by surveying their projects and office environment and conducting an interview to assess the quality of supervision, projects, and support the members are receiving. Following through on areas for improvement identified in our last Evaluation Report, the program began holding final stipend checks until all timesheets are submitted correctly. The SNAP program also invested in an online timesheet service, America Learns, which has greatly improved the efficiency and accuracy of the time sheet system.

**Details from External Review:**

96% of reviewers agree or strongly agree that the SNAP program has an inclusive and effective recruitment process. A quote: "The SNAP program consistently provides very high level applicants for our organization to review. In our experience, the applicants we see through the SNAP program have a higher level of interest, commitment, and skills compared to applicants for local job postings." A constructive comment: "Yes they do and have no problem with this. Suggestion: native american colleges and programs could be targeted to increase applications from native american graduates."

91% of reviewers agree or strongly agree that the SNAP program has an orientation plan that effectively prepares Members for their term of service. Two quotes: "Glad that the Alliance covers all programmatic requirements to that the host site does not have to. Saves us a tremendous amount of time and effort. Thanks!" "Members arrive at our host site with a clear understanding of the requirements of their term of service." A constructive comment: "The initial meeting could be streamlined. It is much more efficient than a few years ago, and I like the direction of minimizing admin."

91% of reviewers agree or strongly agree that the SNAP program Member Training uses service experiences to help members achieve the skills and education needed for productive active citizenship. Two quotes: "The members who have served with us have left their service term

with a great deal more skills and training than they arrived with, and also a network of contacts that they can draw on for graduate school applications, job applications, and other resources in the future.” “As a former SNAP member, the SNAP program is an amazing program for recent graduates to gain the experience needed to break into the conservation field.” No constructive comments.

**Areas for Improvement:** While the program has a very high host site return rate, member recruitment is one of the best selling points of the program. In order to even better meet the host site’s specific needs, the program could work more closely with each host site when member recruitment begins. Identifying specific education and skills that would best support the needs of the host site and its community by providing appropriate services and interventions in order to meet unique needs would help with host site return rates. The program could add specific education and expertise to the position description and focus recruitment on new and specific schools and regions known to have the requested focus. Based on external review from our host sites and partners, Native American colleges and programs could be targeted to increase applications from Native American graduates.

**Impact on Achieving AmeriCorps Goals:** Due to the program’s competitive recruitment process, SNAP members are highly motivated with strong educational backgrounds. They are passionate about what they do and this is reflected in the quality and quantity of the work they are able to complete. Members are also able to reach different segments of Sierra residents especially in their peer group that may not be reached through the volunteer recruitment efforts of other host site staff. Another positive benefit of a strong member design is that members leave the program inspired to continue serving. Many of the program’s members sign on for another year in AmeriCorps, several have moved onto the Peace Corps, many receive jobs at their host sites or through connections made during their term of service, and a few are even running their own nonprofits focusing on issues such as safe drinking water in Uganda and sustainable consumer practices. Members are also able to get hands on experience in the field and training that they then parlay into work opportunities in the environment field or acceptance to top environmental graduate schools.

#### **4. Community Involvement Design**

**Overview and Internal Review:** Over the last eight years, SNAP members have recruited and supported tens of thousands of volunteers to be stewards of Sierra watersheds. Members are well trained in volunteer management and support, thanks to program, Alliance, and host site staffs, and have had great success with volunteer appreciation events. Tracking volunteer numbers and hours is complete and consistent thanks to the SNAP Volunteer Log. The logs consistently show recruitment of new volunteers as well as high volunteer retention and return rates. Members understand and differentiate between the types of volunteers and convey that information to the program. The volunteer recruitment activities undertaken by members multiply their experience and efforts ten to one hundred fold. The resource attainment PMW has been very helpful in allowing members to raise funds that would otherwise not be available to support volunteers. The funds raised have been extremely helpful to purchase supplies for volunteer events such as snacks and water. The program has done an excellent job monitoring these activities to ensure that members are only raising funds that go to their specific service projects (as opposed to general fund), are not writing any federal grants, are not raising money for their site's partner cash match payment, and are not spending more than 10% of their time on these activities.

**Details from External Review:**

95% of reviewers agree or strongly agree that capacity building activities (resource attainment, volunteer management) that SNAP members perform enhance the mission and resources of your organization in order to meet community needs. Two quotes: "Our SNAP members have made highly useful contributions to our organization through capacity building activities."

"Absolutely--100%." Constructive comment (which also shows good knowledge and adherence to policy for not allowing members to raise funds for anything outside of their specific project): "would be better if the scope of their service was broader (e.g. provided funding for more than just their position and service plan activities)."

**Areas for Improvement:** The area of improvement for this standard is a greater focus on the program's media efforts. Aside from creating a new website and keeping it up to date, staff capacity has been limited to do marketing and media work in the past and we need new ideas for conducting media outreach with very limited staff time. We would also like to encourage and support host sites to conduct media outreach in their communities and watersheds. The only specific reviewer feedback was to allow broader capacity building for the host site. This very much not allowed so we cannot have corrective action for the requested improvement.

**Impact on Achieving AmeriCorps Goals:** By using volunteers as often as possible members are able to exponentially increase their impact on Sierra watersheds. Members often work to bring together several different agencies and organizations to work together on projects. In most instances these projects involve recruiting and supporting volunteers which then leads to volunteers being introduced to different organizations as well as organizations seeing more of the value of engaging volunteers. While working with volunteers, members are also excellent examples of community service and inspire others in their communities to serve. Also by recruiting and supporting volunteers, AmeriCorps members are given the opportunity to manage people through the duration of the project which is an important step in professional development.

## **5. Program Design is Effective**

**Overview and Internal Review:** The initial review has proved to be very successful as evidenced by our greatly successful program and projects. In the past few years of the program, staff have improved and honed tracking systems and the review process. The implementation review has been very successful at ensuring compliance and that the program is meeting its targets and serving its designated beneficiaries. Program impacts and member activities are reviewed on a monthly basis. In addition, the program communicates frequently with members and supervisors on the program's targets and results to date as well as any compliance questions that arise. The program also has strong systems for results review. The program successfully monitors the output and outcomes for performance measures and adjusts the program through member and host site recruitment, orientation and trainings, and member supervision and tracking throughout the service terms. An area of improvement identified in the 2011 Evaluation Report was timesheet review and approval. We are happy to report that we have greatly improved those processes and no longer have regular issues with members and timesheets.

### **Details from External Review:**

78% of reviewers agree or strongly agree that The SNAP program reviews itself and takes feedback and advice resulting in positive changes to the program. Two quotes: "We appreciate the SNAP program so very much and don't know what we would do without this program in place. Our AmeriCorps members are energetic, effective, and "getting things done" for our organization." "The SNAP program has offered many opportunities for feedback, and has been

responsive to feedback that has led to refinements in how the program is implemented, and how host sites participate. These improvements have led to a better use of everyone's time, so we can dedicate more efforts towards the programs we work on and the members' development.” No constructive comments.

**Areas for Improvement:** During the results review stage, the program can work more closely with the program partners to conduct more thorough review of program outcomes and identify continuous improvement strategies, instead of just relying on internal review and unrequested partnership feedback. The program historically sends out its final review and report but during this busy time with wrapping one program up and starting another the partnership does not get together to review the program’s final results. The program should devise a review process that works for the all of the partners’ schedules. This early-term Evaluation Report is one such process that might work. Our external reviewers did not provide any specific feedback for improvement.

**Impact on Achieving AmeriCorps Goals:** The program’s thorough three stage review process along with constant monitoring of the program has ensured that the program is not only getting things done but completing the work it was funded to do addressing the proper beneficiaries and utilizing the intended intervention. Another major benefit for the program’s design is that it teaches responsibility to members. For many members the SNAP program is their first ‘real job’ and the first time they have had to complete timesheets and track their work. Although many of them do not necessarily enjoy completing timesheets and documenting all of their work, it is an essential skill that they build for their future careers especially if members decide to continue with a career in the nonprofit or governmental sectors that require transparency and documentation of all the work completed. Members are better prepared for their next career step after completing the SNAP program.

## **Conclusion**

Overall the program has done extremely well during the first two and beginning of the third years of its third funding cycle with regards to the five CaliforniaVolunteers Program Standards. This has resulted in the program having considerable contributions to achieving AmeriCorps’ four overall goals getting things done, strengthening communities, encouraging responsibility,

and expanding opportunity. Main areas of improvement that will help us continue to achieve AmeriCorps' four overall goals include increasing marketing and media and a fully developed financial strategy for future, starting in the first year of the next three-year cycle.