

Grant Selection Process Report to Full Commission

Legal Applicant: Maine Youth Alliance dba Game Loft **Program name:** I KNOW ME AmeriCorps

Recommendation: _____

Reviewers: **TF:** Barrett, Proulx-Curry, Meinders **Peer:** Hartt, Hennessey, Shapiro

Grant Category: Formula Competitive
 Other Competition **Performance Period:** Year 1 Year 2 Year 3
 Cost Reimbursement

Grant Type: Planning **Start/End Date:** 01/01/2022 to 12/31/2024
 Fixed Price Ed Award Only

Applicant Type: Recompete New

ME Priority Area: Education **Fed Priority Area(s):**

Request for New Resources	CNCS	Local
New CNCS Funds: <u>\$65,200</u>	Cost sharing proposed <u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
Match Committed: <u>\$n/a</u>	Min. Match required <u>%</u>	_____
Total Grant Budget: <u>\$</u>		
Cost Per Member: <u>\$16,300</u>		

AmeriCorps Member Service Years: <u>4</u>				
FT	HT	RHT	QT	MT
4				

Slots with living allowance
Education Award only

Total prior years with CNCS funding: 3

Prior experience with CNCS funding: Maine Youth Alliance applied for its first direct AmeriCorps grant 3 years ago and was funded as one of the rural programs. This proposal is submitted under the new policy that permits inexperienced organizations to have 2 full grants before moving into the standard competition. Their program model is unchanged.

Statement of Need (from application narrative):

Waldo County meets the criteria as rural because it has the Rural U.S. Department of Agriculture (RUCA) code of 6. All youth in RSU 3 (the 11 towns in western Waldo County, Maine) lack the knowledge, attitude, behaviors, skills and aspirations necessary for success in school and in later life according to David Holinger, RSU 3 middle school principal in Thorndike, Maine. The social, academic, and behavioral set-backs of Covid-19 are prevalent and severe and the duration will last for at least a decade. His estimate is that 100% of the student body of RSU 3 has been adversely affected but that many students in the IKME program have been particularly impacted by the social isolation and disruption of 2020-2021.

Rural Waldo County has low-achieving middle and high schools with disadvantaged students. The I Know ME program has served this school district for the past three years using the services of AmeriCorps members. During that time significant progress has been measured in the students in the program by the Holistic Student Assessment, teacher comments, parent satisfaction, and student satisfaction but the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has been a great set-back to the progress of these students. In the fall of 2021, 31 students were surveyed using the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) from the Pear Institute at Harvard University. Using that study, IKME students were below the national average in: action orientation, emotional control, assertiveness, perseverance, trust, empathy, reflection, optimism, relationship with peers, relationships with adults, learning interest, critical thinking, academic motivation, school bonding, hyperactivity/inattention, conduct problems, emotional symptoms, peer problems, and prosocial behavior. Pamela Smith, guidance counselor at RSU 3, said that all of these problems were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Students in RSU 3 are economically disadvantaged. The 11 western Waldo County towns that make up RSU 3 have levels of poverty in families with youth under the age of 18: Brooks 36%, Freedom 36%, Jackson 44%, Knox 30%, Liberty 18%, Monroe 33%, Montville 12%, Thorndike, Troy 30%, Unity 19% and Waldo 37%. This compares to Maine's rate of 18%. (Waldo County Community Needs Assessment 2018). The former industry was raising chickens for processing in Belfast but by 1990 the chicken industry closed and coastal Waldo County became gentrified. Low-income families moved to western Waldo County where there were few jobs and little access to community services. Today the median household income for the 11 towns \$37,500 compared to the median household income in Maine of \$58,924 and median U.S. household income of \$68,400. According to the 2020 Kids Count Data Book Waldo County has 18.6% poverty rate for children from birth to 18. In RSU 3, 100% of students receive free lunch. Of the four school districts in Waldo County RSU 3 has the highest poverty level and the greatest amount of community need for support services. Youth in this area are geographically, socially, and technologically isolated. Broadband services are limited and difficult for students to access as was particularly evident during the recent pandemic. There is no public transportation that serves youth in this area. Social support services center on the school and a handful of after-school activities and sports. EVIDENCE OF LOW ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE. Tests show that RSU 3 performs poorly compared to schools in other regions of the state. At RSU 3 there are 275 middle school students and 320 in grades 9-12. In RSU 3, 13% of students do not graduate on time. RSU 3 middle and high schools fit the definition of low achieving schools. According to the Maine Educational Assessment in RSU 3, 55.5% of all students are below or well-below the state expectations in English/Language Arts and in RSU 3 High School students the number is 58.5% below state expectations. In Math, for all RSU 3 grades, 79.4% are below state expectations and 82.5% of high school students are below state expectations. In Science, all students are 50.5% below the state expectations, and 57.6% of high school students are below state expectations.

Program Summary (from application):

The Maine Youth Alliance dba The Game Loft/I Know ME proposes to have 4 AmeriCorps members who will serve as mentors for youth in grades 7-12 in Waldo County, ME. At the end of the first program year, the AmeriCorps program will have improved educational outcomes for economically disadvantaged youth, and will improve educational and behavioral outcomes of students in low-achieving middle and high schools. In addition, the AmeriCorps members will leverage an additional ten volunteers who will be engaged in youth mentoring. The I Know ME Program will concentrate on the Education Focus Area. The AmeriCorps investment of \$65,200.00 will be matched with \$135,250.00 in private funding.

Identified partners:

- Long Range Planning Committee of the Maine Youth Alliance (MEYA),
- RSU 3 school district,
- IKME Community Advisory Board,
- The Lerner Foundation,
- Trekkers Training Institute,
- JMG program

Host sites (if applicable): n/a

SCORING DETAIL

I. Summary of Peer Reviewer Consensus Scores

CATEGORY	Rating	Points
Rationale & Approach/Program Design Section (50%)		
Need	Strong	5
Intervention	Adequate	6
Theory of Change, Evidence of Effectiveness, Logic Model	Adequate	12
Notice Priority	Adequate	0.75
Member Training	Adequate	4.5
Member Supervision	Adequate	4.5
Member Experience	Strong	5
Commitment to AmeriCorps Identification	Adequate	2.25
Organizational Capability Overall Rating 25%		
Organizational Background and Staffing	Adequate	9
Compliance and Accountability	Adequate	9.75
Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy 25%		
Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy	Adequate	18.75
	Total	77.5
Recommend for Further Review with Hesitation		

II. Summary of Task Force Consensus Rating and Final Score:

Category	Rating	Points
Program Alignment & Model		
Degree to which the community need targeted by the proposal is aligned with one of the funding priorities stated in the RFP	Strong	3.75
Extent to which proposal will serve specified communities and add to diversity of Commission's portfolio	Strong	3.75
Proposal is innovative use of AmeriCorps and might be replicated	Adequate	2.81
Evidence the program can be sustained beyond initial start up	Weak	1.88
Communities to be served fall withing one of the non-metro RUCC codes	Strong	5
Past Performance		
Can comply with requirements, info consistent with other grant administrator's info, consistent with externally verified past performance	Adequate	2.81
RECOMPETE ONLY: applicant used member positions	Strong	3.75
RECOMPETE ONLY: used financial resources allocated	Adequate	2.71
RECOMPETE ONLY: implemented program effectively	Adequate	2.81
Financial Plan	Adequate	11.25
Fiscal Systems		
Capacity of Financial mgt system to comply with fed requirements	Adequate	6.25
Strength of orgz financial mgt practices as evidenced by audits, etc.	Weak	4.17
Strength of sponsor orgs financial status/stability per audit, 990, etc.	Incomplete/Nonresponsive	0
Grant Readiness		
Program Integration	Strong	5
Proposal Support	Adequate	3.75
Applicant Readiness	Adequate	3.75
Volunteer Management Strength and Experience	Adequate	3.75
	GTF Review Total:	67.29 of 100 possible

III. Final Combined Score

Total	144.79 of 200
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Final Assessment of Application:

Fund with no Corrections

Fund with Corrections

Do Not Fund

Referenced Conditions/Corrections:

1. 990 and audit must be up to date. Financial information was old.
2. Clarify the amount of time dedicated to member training
3. Target for volunteers is low - adjust

PEER REVIEWER COMMENTS COMPILED**Section: Program Design (50 %)*****Need***

- The statistical information was thorough and local educators confirm statistics.
- Meet the Rural U.S Department of Agriculture code of 6. Covid 19 has negatively impacted students in the district through social isolation and academic and behavioral setbacks. Low achieving middle and high school and high levels of poverty. Spoke with the school principle and staff to receive first-hand account. Youth, parents and board members helped to create the program.
- The rural status of RSU 3 (category 6) is described along with the need to provide social, academic and behavioral support. Local data is included and relevant that 100% of students qualify for free/reduced lunch, lower than average achievement and average income. Progress made by participating students according to the Holistic Student Assessment is depicted. Both the board and youth board were involved with planning.

Intervention

- The plan is clear; what does not seem clear is how student participants will be chosen, when according to needs statements every student in Waldo County could benefit. Also not quite clear about how community volunteers are being involved.
- AmeriCorps member will increase the participation from 20 to 60 students worked with. Students enrolled in the program will participate for 7 years. They will have weekly cohort meetings lasting 2 hours per week as well as peripheral programming and field trips.
- The population, duration, and frequency are adequately described. Roles are specifically described with examples of what a week would look like.

Theory of Change, Evidence of Effectiveness, Logic Model

- The planning is detailed and has assessment as part of the programming
- They will use the DOSAGE mentoring services for at least one hour per week. The permanent change is that there will be more youth mentored by members. Each year the program will recruit more program participants. Families will also report increased satisfaction as the program continues. There was no clear reasoning behind the increase in participant numbers each year.
- The proposal indicates that the program would increase the number of youth who can access the program. Measurable outcomes include changes on student scores based on the HSA. (The proposal indicates that improvement would be successful though more specific evidence could be collected quantified the scores into a standard deviation). The role of the members is described as serving more students as well as training more volunteers. The description of how the AmeriCorps program fits into applicant organizations goals is adequate.
- Rationale behind target increases was not provided. What will change that makes that possible.
- The evidence wasn't strong. There is a lot more evidence-based literature that could have been used.

Evidence of Effectiveness

- The plan for growth is specific, and effectiveness seems to be backed by research
- They will be using designed mentoring. They will work to create youth skills and aspirations. The Lerner Foundation recommends a 1:3 ration for youth to adult mentors, hosting AmeriCorps will allow them to reach this ratio. They will add to the community because it allows for more small group work which has been proven to be more effective.
- The proposal uses two citations. One is for a definition. This is not sufficient evidence by subject experts.

Notice Priority

- The funding priority is education. The goals of the program are to help increase education and behavioral outcomes.

- Although the stated focus is education, one of the federal foci, a case might be made that with its emphasis on social, and emotional growth, as well as academics, the program will also lead to workforce development. The possibility exists that healthy workers are better workers.
- The proposal defines the funding priority as education which is appropriate given the intervention and target population.

Member Training

- In addition to the required training from AmeriCorps, members will be given additional training for working with youth, public speaking and more.
- Members will receive 170 hours of training. If they are planning on doing such an in-depth training I would like to see more information about what this training will entail and the capacity the organization has to offer a 4 week training. Members will be trained in AmeriCorps requirements and prohibited activities.
- 170 total hours in Positive Youth Development; mentoring; first aid/CPR; volunteer Maine; lifeguard; public speaking; poverty and community training. The proposal indicates that the members will be trained in prohibited activities
- For an organization that acknowledged a weakness is staffing later in narrative, the planning/preparation needed to deliver 170 hours of training is significant. Did not identify how they would accomplish training given they are such a small organization.

Member Supervision

- The design of the program includes multiple levels of supervision, and specifies hours with supervisors and supervisor qualifications.
- The members will be managed by a past AmeriCorps Member. Everyday they will have a morning check in as a group, and will meet with the manager for at least one hour individually a week.
- Strong alumni network. Staff is familiar with programming as a supervisor. Daily group meetings and weekly individual supervision meetings will occur. Supervisor involvement w/ cohort meeting, support for student programming/plans allows for adequate supervision.
- Skeptical of training. One person as supervisor is going to lead 14 skill trainings. Where is person going to have the time.
- They have good ideas but do they have the resources in such a small organization to implement them.

Member Experience

- The plan for member experience is thorough and the opportunities for growth seem expansive.
- Proposal states the program manager will be leading trainings on the 14 things that Indeed how will the program manager be learning these skills. How will the program manager create this training to make sure they are meaningful experiences for the members. They will have the opportunity to participate in a day of service on MLK day. Reflection will be built into the program. They will attend an AmeriCorps conference with other members serving in the state.
- AmeriCorps members will touch base with their supervisor every three months to rate self-perceived progress on listed top employment skills. Meaningful service will occur through the Game Loft program and learning about the community. A strong focus on scheduled time for reflection is indicated. The connection to the broader service and local and national recruitment were each described adequately.
- Connection to National Service network is not well addressed.
- Public speaking training is a good preparation for future work. Impressed by quarterly reviews.

Commitment to AmeriCorps Identification

- The name of the Project incorporates AmeriCorps name, members and workplaces will be "branded."
- Will be referred to as AmeriCorps members not staff. The members will wear AmeriCorps clothing and have the logo on their business cards.
- The proposal describes using language, branding with logos and signage to demonstrate the affiliation. The descriptive title contains "AmeriCorps."
- Checked all the boxes but nothing outstanding.

Organizational Capability Overall Rating 25%

Organizational Background and Staffing

- The organization has community backing, is long standing, and staff is already in place.

- There is a current program manager for IKME and will receive guidance from the Founding Directors. The board also closely oversees the program. The proposal was a group effort including all of the previously mentioned entities. The program recently split from the Game Loft. Now there is dedicated staff for both aspects of the program. The board and management will meet have strong control over the program. The program founders will dedicate .75 FTE to the program and the Program Manager will be fully dedicated to the IKME program.
- The program demonstrates experience, growth and history of AmeriCorps service and funding from other grants, along with volunteer community involvement. There is an organized board w/committees reporting to the full MEYA board. Board, management, and staff work together but does not describe specifics re: how the board collects and uses information for learning and decision making other than providing the overall structure and priorities of each committee. The directors are named and each are .75 FTE and the program manager is full time.

Compliance and Accountability

- The compliance and accountability section seems to rest on the organization's interactions with other organizations. I would have likes specifics about who handles what aspect of accountability.
- They have monthly financial reporting. Management and staff make monthly financial and programmatic reports to the board. Board members review policies annually. There are three authorized signers. They use a bookkeeping service for consulting on monthly reports.
- Organizational policies are described in detail and currently in place. Reporting methods and internal controls are also described as well as accountability for staff.

Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy **25%**

- Fixed Amount funding.
- The MSY cost is \$16,300, equal to the maximum amount. Local match nearly doubles the AmeriCorps funds requested. Funds and resources are sufficient to support the program.

TASK FORCE REVIEWER COMMENT DETAIL:

Program Alignment and Model

- This program fits education focus for federal funding but doesn't directly line with Maine priorities
- The proposal does not address any of the Commission's priorities for this competition
- The program will be operating in a rural area in which the Commission has no other grantees.
- The program is based on a mentoring model designed to improve student performance. As such, it is similar to other mentoring programs supported by the Commission and I would not consider it particularly innovative. As a part of a wider Lerner Foundation effort involving six communities, it is perhaps more likely than some others to provide a model to be emulated elsewhere in the state.
- While the program clearly aligns with the organization's overall mission and has a strong level of local support, it is not financially strong, frequently operating in the red although there has been some reported improvement over the years. The most recent audit is from 2018, so recent financial information is based on statements that are not verified by outside sources. The agency is also in violation of a contract requirement for an annual outside financial review and it is unclear when more recent information will be available. There are some indications that accounting systems and standards are weak. As a result, it is unclear to what extent the agency will be able to sustain the program after this grant ends and the Lerner Foundation grant runs out. In addition, the success of the agency has been closely related to the co-founders who have plans to retire within the next three-year grant period. While efforts have been made to strengthen the organization's board in recent years in light of the needed transition, this will still likely pose a significant challenge.
- The program does have a strong history of volunteer involvement and community support in developing and implementing its programming.
- On a positive note, there is a new program manager position to supervise the program. This position may be helpful in transitioning the agency to new leadership in the future.
- Well documented need and theory of change. Well designed program

Past Performance

- Grantee indicates \$135,250 in local funds will be used to support the program; however, the sources of these funds are not specified.
- The addition of a program manager position should help with program management and member supervision as well as potentially assist with the looming leadership transition facing the organization
- The agency has shown success in the past in meeting its program performance targets

- The start-up plan is fairly weak and seems to largely depend on what has been done in the past, which shows some gaps in certain areas such as member recruitment and evaluation, selection qualifications, and required policies. Many of these should already be in place.
- There have been some past reporting problems, although they have not resulted in major issues.
- The program has been generally successful in recruiting and retaining members who have reported a positive experience.
- As noted, the program generally appears to be achieving its goals and objectives although it has had some issues with reporting and meeting all administrative requirements.
- The program directors noted during the interview that the AmeriCorps requirements have moved the organization to a higher level of administrative and financial performance. This is certainly a positive for the organization and shows that it has put effort into upgrading these areas, although at times still not fully meeting requirements in a timely manner.
- Peer review. Organization has undergone reorganization due to issues in the past. No history yet with reorganized structure.

Financial Plan

- If funded, program will move to a fixed amount grant. This will eliminate many of the financial reporting obligations. Cost per member is ok. Local match is to be provided from private sources, which are not specified.
- Reorganization appears to be logical and workable.

Fiscal Systems

- They will be using Quickbooks, but unsure of their expertise.
- As noted elsewhere, financial and accounting systems seem to be weak but are likely adequate for a fixed amount grant.
- Audit report and 990 are outdated and agency is not in compliance with audit/financial review requirement. If funded, this must be addressed
- The agency's financial situation is not strong, although based on undocumented but likely reliable statements during the interview, the financial condition has improved in recent years and during the period of pandemic impact. However, this improvement may weaken at the end of the Lerner Foundation grant. It's not clear how much of an impact this will have.
- audit report and description of organizational restructuring.

Grant Readiness

- Their answers were strong in their interview
- This program integrates well into the agencies overall mission and other programs.
- The program seems to be well supported by the community and schools with which it works. Past financial reporting issues should be mitigated by a fixed amount grant. Local match seems to be available.
- The agency has a long history of volunteer support.
- Community support and readiness seem to have strengthened due to the agencies' response to the pandemic. While maintaining the basic AC program via remote platforms, additional time was spent on basic support/food issues which increased agency visibility and contacts with community members.
- Agency has strong volunteer support but has fairly minimal systems in place for tracking and reporting volunteer efforts and currently lacks a single position to oversee/manage the program's volunteers. Agency seems aware of this and is discussing how to improve.
- Other Comments
 - If funded, agency should be required to bring its 990 and financial review up to date and comply with its contractual agreements in this regard.
 - Organization should document that they actually have acceptable accounting practices in place and appropriate safeguards to ensure expenditures are appropriate.
 - The amount of time devoted to member training should be clarified
 - Clarification is needed on how members will allocate/spend their time in light of the request for increased slots.
 - The target for volunteers seems low
- Good member training and experience.