

Grant Selection Process Report to Full Commission

Legal Applicant: Trekkers **Program name:** Trekkers Building Relationships

Recommendation: _____

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

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

Grant Type: Planning Fixed Price Ed Award Only
Start/End Date: 9/01/2021 to 8/31/2024

Applicant Type: Recompete New

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

Request for New Resources		CNCS	Local
New CNCS Funds:	<u>\$48,900</u>	Cost sharing proposed	<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>3</u>				
	FT	HT	RHT	QT	MT
Slots with living allowance	3				
Education Award only					

Total prior years with CNCS funding: 3

Prior experience with CNCS funding: Trekkers 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):

Trekkers AmeriCorps Mentors program will take place primarily within six towns, Rockland, Thomaston, South Thomaston, Cushing, Owls Head and St. George in Knox County Maine. Knox County is classified as rural using the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes. The need to be addressed by AmeriCorps service: Youth living in homogeneous and rural communities experience an opportunity gap (lack of resources, opportunities and coordinated enriching experiences). In our rural community of Knox County 17.9% of children under 18 live in poverty (higher than the Maine State average). Within our six town direct service area 55% of students are eligible for subsidized school meals (higher than the Maine State average). Youth experience lower aspirations, achievement and attainment; feel disconnected from their community and lack self-confidence when: they are not given the skills to develop aspirational goals and work towards them; they have limited opportunities for positive adult-youth connections in the community; their strengths are not nurtured and lifted up; they experience challenges that are not addressed or supported by peers, family, schools or the community. Oceanside High School, the primary High School for students in our service had the second lowest graduation rate in the State at 74.1% according to 2016 State data. The graduation rate has risen steadily since 2016, coinciding with Trekkers expansion within the high school. Many of Trekkers' students are the first in their families to attend college. Many of our students lack primary role models and a direct connection to their areas of interest and experience a disconnect between their aspirations and the road to getting there. Trekkers was created by concerned community members 26 years ago to address the needs they saw for local students. Trekkers responded to community need by recently completing an expansion project to double the number of students served. The organization engaged community members in designing the proposed AmeriCorps program and the community will be involved in program

implementation. We have experienced increased demand for caring adult role models, academic assistance, social-emotional supports and local community service opportunities. The social-emotional needs of our students have been increasing steadily. According to the results of the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA), a survey designed to measure social emotional strengths and challenges, the number of Trekkers students identifying the need for Tier 3 supports has more than double in the past 3 years, to 18.5%. Students in need of Tier 3 supports identify only challenges on the HSA, no strengths. Trekkers AmeriCorps Relationship Building Program has been designed to address these needs. These strategies are designed to address the opportunity gap and set students up for long term success by graduating high school and having post-secondary aspirations and plans.

Program Summary (from application):

Trekkers proposes to have three AmeriCorps members who will provide mentoring to 7th -12th grade students, recruit volunteers and cultivate community partnerships in Knox County, Maine. At the end of the first program year, the AmeriCorps program will have increased the number of hours each Trekkers participant has spent with a mentor, and increased the number of Trekkers participants receiving other local supports and participating in local community service activities due to an increase in organizations working collaboratively with Trekkers. In addition, the AmeriCorps members will leverage and additional 60 volunteers who will be engaged in mentoring. The program will concentrate on the Education Focus Area. The AmeriCorps investment of \$48,900 will be matched with \$0 in public funding and \$46,539 in private funding.

Identified partners:

- Oceanside High School

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	Weak	2.5
Intervention	Weak	4
Theory of Change, Evidence of Effectiveness, Logic Model	Weak	8
Notice Priority	Adequate	0.75
Member Training	Adequate	4.5
Member Supervision	Adequate	4.5
Member Experience	Adequate	3.75
Commitment to AmeriCorps Identification	Weak	1.5
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		67
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	Strong	3.75
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	Strong	3.75
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	6.23
Strength of orgz financial mgt practices as evidenced by audits, etc.	Strong	8.33
Strength of sponsor orgs financial status/stability per audit, 990, etc.	Strong	8.34
Grant Readiness		
Program Integration	Strong	5
Proposal Support	Adequate	3.75
Applicant Readiness	Strong	5
Volunteer Management Strength and Experience	Strong	5
GTF Review Total:		85.11 of 100 possible

III. Final Combined Score

Total	152.11 of 200 possible
--------------	------------------------

Final Assessment of Application:

Fund with no Corrections
 Fund with Corrections
 Do Not Fund

Referenced Conditions/Corrections:

1. Need to explain how an AC member would be able to mentor 50 people.
2. Need to explain what an HAS tier 3 is.
3. Performance measures -- math for target on outcome doesn't work; revisit Performance Measures and whether they are best for project.
4. Meet requirement for AmeriCorps to be part of program name.

PEER REVIEWER COMMENTS COMPILED

Section: Program Design (50 %)

Need

- With a large number of students living in poverty, many needs are present. Low HS graduation rates need attention. These needs are stated in condescending ways, however. And what is a Tier 3 support? No explanation of what this means.
- The program will take place primarily in six towns, Rockland, Thomaston, South Thomaston, Cushing, Owls Head and St. George. Knox County is defined as rural using the USDA definitions. The Need: Youth in rural communities experience an opportunity gap. 17.9% of children in Knox county live below the poverty, which is higher than the Maine state average. Youth have limited opportunities for positive adult connections and have lower aspirations. The

main high school serviced has the second lowest graduations rate in the state. Using program data (Holistic Student Assessment) it has shown Trekkers need for Tier 3 supports has more than doubled. Says community members were engaged in creating the AmeriCorps program but doesn't say who.

- Knox county meets the RUCC classification for rural. The specific rating is not described. The data supporting the need includes low graduation rates (particularly at one high school where the graduation rate is the second lowest in Maine) and the number of Trekker students identified as having needs on the HAS has doubled over recent years. The evidence could have been further supported with more relevant data. The proposal identifies Trekker as an organization that came about by community members to address community needs 26 years ago. The role that the community members had in program design was not described.
- Often just made statement with no detail as if affirming they would do something like involve community.

Intervention

- The term "opportunity gap" is offensive. Seems an elitist attitude towards youth in rural communities. Also question whether anyone can successfully mentor 50 students...not even an hour a week with each person.
- No information on how youth would be identified and enlisted to participate.
- Doesn't clearly define project duration. Gives a typical week, but doesn't break down by hours to get an understanding of what which day will look like, not apparent it will equal apx. 40 hours per week. Each member will spend 10 hours a week mentoring in a small group or one on one. Trips and expeditions will be a large part of service (700 hours). But gives no indication of what happens on a trip, a lot of time not accounted for. The target population is young adults who face an opportunity gap and lack positive adult role models in their lives. Will serve 240 students a year.
- The organization has been around a long time and probably developed with community involvement but it seems to rest heavily on that history. Doesn't talk about community involvement now.
- The duration and intensity of the intervention are not described in this section. The target population is not described in this section. The proposed roles of AmeriCorps members is given in a general manner (ex. attending cohort meetings, weekly supervision, meetings with community partners) but specifics are not described. The proposed intervention is described in terms of how it aligns with the community need. The role of community volunteers in the program is not described but the recruitment of volunteers by AmeriCorps members is described.

Theory of Change, Evidence of Effectiveness, Logic Model

- The studies and statistics would have been made stronger by having an endorsement of the program by a participant. If 2020 graduation rates really reflect Trekkers influence, that would have been a strong argument.
- Each AmeriCorps will meet with a minimum of 50 youth. The goal is to use the "step ladder" approach creating small purposeful learning communities. They will work to recruit volunteers to have sustainability post AmeriCorps.
- The number of children served and specific targets are not set. Evidence of the intervention is adequate and includes the five principles that the program was designed around. There is a description of how the addition of AmeriCorps members in the past has had a significant impact on the organization and how having AmeriCorps members boosts their ability to recruit and retain volunteers. This is described as essential to Trekkers fulfilling their mission. Trekkers leaders have participated in training and is committed to the Service Enterprise training. The logic model describes activities and inputs sufficiently but does not quantify outputs (eg. specific number of hours an AmeriCorps member will engage with a student) nor a tool for measuring outcomes.

Evidence of Effectiveness

- Studies cited, not local experience, which they have.
- Mentoring programs have been proven effective. Uses many citations to prove effectiveness. Using AmeriCorps will double the amount of mentoring time with each student.

Notice Priority

- Straight-forward statement of goals and hoped for outcomes.
- Education Focus. strategies will improve education and behavioral outcomes for students. Doesn't have AmeriCorps in the program name.
- The funding priority is described as Education Focus. This fits within the AmeriCorps funding priority outlined in the RFP.

Member Training

- The members will have access to high quality education in relationship building, certification in wilderness first aid is a valuable commodity, as well as AmeriCorps educational opportunities.

- Doesn't indicate how long the training will be. There will be site specific training from the Trekkers Training Institute. Will be trained in Wilderness First Aid, mandated reporting, mental health first aid, ACES and trauma informed program development.
- Trekkers has an existing training institute where AmeriCorps members will receive their training. Training is expected to include Wilderness First Aid, mandated reporting, ACES, trauma-informed care, mental health first aid and best practices for volunteer management. Orientation to the AmeriCorps program will be included.
- No indication how long training is. How will they tailor training for less experienced people.
- The training listed is basic. It is not particularly skilled.

Member Supervision

- There is an existing staff with experience in their own program and with AmeriCorps. The plan for individual supervision is more than adequate in terms of time allowed.
- Two AmeriCorps Alum will serve as the direct supervisors. The program as a whole will be over seen by the program manager and executive director. There will be weekly individual supervision meetings, and members will attend program manager meetings and staff meetings. ED will provide formal check ins at 2 month and 6 months. Training will provide orientation, and attempt to connect members throughout the state. Would have liked a little more detail surrounding the program training and preparing supervisors.
- Each AmeriCorps member will have their own direct supervisor (a change recommended by the Program Committee for program improvement). There will be weekly individual supervision meetings. Training and supervision for supervisors will be provided by the program director and executive director and includes orientation to AmeriCorps as well as connection to other members in the state.

Member Experience

- Has the possibility of being professionally expansive and personally rewarding.
- Members will have the opportunity to meet with community partners, public speaking and serve on committees. Will go through training on professional development. Will become Wilderness First Aid certified, Mandated Reporters, and Mental Health First Aid. Reflection is part of the experience. Will be connected to broader AmeriCorps network. Will have option to volunteer on MLK day. Will use MANP, Idealist and networks for recruitment.
- The proposal describes connecting members to the strong alumni program that Trekkers has as well as national service members. Recruitment methods are adequately described and include a local and national ads. The experience of the members is described as the opportunity to "meet regularly with community partners give presentations..... practice public speaking and sit on youth engagement committees." This experience list adequately describes transferrable skills. Service opportunities (and recruitment of volunteers to join in) is described.

Commitment to AmeriCorps Identification

- Leaving "AmeriCorps" out of the name of the project on the title page is bad...but members get the T shirt... They mostly refer only to Trekkers instead of Trekkers AmeriCorps in the body of their documents.
- Position will be clearly identified as AmeriCorps. Trekkers displays AmeriCorps signage; members wear clothing with the logos. Press Releases and social media to introduce members.
- This proposal adequately describes commitment to AmeriCorps identification through signage and apparel. The applicant project does not include the AmeriCorps name in it.

Organizational Capability Overall Rating 25%

Organizational Background and Staffing

- It's clear they know who their staff are,, and they are well qualified. They seem to have standard corporate structure.
- 9 full time and part time staff. All have experience with outdoor education and relevant experience to the position. 5 will be involved in the AmeriCorps program, does not break down the FTE for each staff person. Does not say who developed the proposal. Organization does have experience engaging volunteers.
- Staff experience and management are relevant to the program, and strong in non-profit and youth development. The description of the organizational capacity is strong: Several organizational policies are in place including policies related to funding, management, documentation and decision making. A strong alumni presence exists within the organization. FTE of the director and supervisors is not described.

Compliance and Accountability

- Response reads as if they ran out of steam The list of ways that they stay accountable is a list. No process description – who does it.

- Board bylaws reviewed annually, volunteer onboarding, updated personnel policy, board committees oversea. Finance committee regularly reviews handbook. Asset and cash management policies, segregation between grant and donated funds, signature authority, spending limits. Says they do these things but does not describe the policies themselves.
- This application describes several internal controls to protect against waste, fraud, and abuse, including an external review of finances, documentations, and policies related to spending. The proposal indicates that it will be held accountable if instances of noncompliance are identified.

Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy 25%

- It's there. fixed budget, numbers align.
- The source of funds screen indicates sufficient non-AmeriCorps funding. The cost per MSY is \$16,300, and equal to the maximum cost.

TASK FORCE REVIEWER COMMENT DETAIL:

Program Alignment and Model

- Fits federal focus of Education but not Maine priorities directly. Perhaps Workforce Development indirectly
- While education is an allowable program area, the proposal does not address a Commission priority area.
- The program is addressing a rural area that is not otherwise addressed by Commission grant funded programs.
- While the program itself could be duplicated elsewhere (see for example the Maine Youth Alliance program also funded by the Commission which is generally a similarly structured mentoring program), it is not particularly innovative given the number of mentoring programs that exist elsewhere.
- There should be no major concern about the program continuing in future years given that this grant is for a second three years of funding for an existing program operated by an agency that has been in existence for some time. I initially had some concern over the agency's finances given the negative revenue impact of the pandemic and an increase in agency liabilities. However, based on information provided in the interview, one Payroll Protection Program loan has already been forgiven and a second qualifies for forgiveness. In addition, the long-term debt that was incurred was for purchase of a capital asset to be used for the agency's programming. I'm comfortable that the program can operate for the coming three-year cycle. Much of the covid revenue impact was due to a board decision to waive program dues as a result of the pandemic. These should be reinstated at some point in the next grant cycle.
- The proposal aligns with program mission in that it basically allows the agency to serve more students.
- The current executive director has been with the program for five years and the agency has a succession plan in place that addresses continuity in light of staff turnover.
- Community engagement was not specifically addressed in the grant application; however, information on this was presented during the interview. The agency has a program committee composed of staff/board members/student and parents. Programs must be approved by the Board if they involve non-budgeted funds or acceptance of new grants.
- The agency has a large number of volunteers in various agencies including administration/programming-mentoring/and special events and a data system that allows for tracking volunteers that is planned for an upgrade that will increase the ability to track volunteered hours and the value of volunteer time. One staff member has primary responsibility for the administrative end of volunteer processing while staff in various areas are involved in on-boarding and volunteer training.
- The program has traditionally worked closely with the school system that, in the past, has provided program space. This was obviously affected by the pandemic and the agency has purchased program space that it can control. The issue of partnerships was not addressed much in the application and could be strengthened going forward.
- Some of my comments above reflect information provided during the interview process that was not clearly addressed or covered in the actual RFP response. The RFP response was poorly organized and hard to follow and did not cover sufficiently cover all of the areas requested.
- Mentorship need well documented. Program directly addresses need, and has strong track record for doing so.

Past Performance

- This program has a good track record and is expanding this period with an additional AmeriCorps member.
- The agency ran a generally successful program during its initial three years where it operated under a cost reimbursement budget that required substantially more reporting/compliance than the proposed fixed cost application now being reviewed.
- The program was generally successful in filling its positions (100%) and retaining members (85%).

- While there were some minor reporting issues related to staff turnover, the program was generally compliant. It also did a good job in pivoting its program to meet the challenges of Covid, moving to remote mentoring and an emphasis on community service by the AC members.
- I can't judge whether the program achieved its targets based on the information available. I would assume there may have been some slippage given the effects of the pandemic.
- The organization seems to have a full range of administrative and personnel systems and policies in place.
- Able to continue programming during pandemic. Did not have to layoff staff. Graduation rates increased. Able to pivot, redirect activity, and generate new sources of revenue.

Financial Plan

- This is a fixed cost grant, so most of what is listed above as considerations does not apply. The agency was not specific as to the exact sources of funding to meet the match requirements; however, it is likely to come from the same general sources used during the first three-year grant cycle.
- Has good sense from prior year of what costs will be.

Fiscal Systems

- The agency generally has sound financial management systems in place with minor exceptions, such as the inability to track governmental grants separately. There could also be a segregation of duties issue given the small size of staff, but the agency appears to have appropriate policies in place to address this.
- The agency is not required to have an annual audit given the small size of this grant. They do provide an annual financial statement review that, on first glance, raises some questions given the impact of Covid on operations. However, as noted in the interview, it appears that these concerns have been addressed.
- 2020 990 does not reflect PPP loan forgiveness although that has happened. Financial position stronger than 990 suggests. Able to secure PPP and other grant funding to make up for other revenue losses. Able to buy a building.

Grant Readiness

- The program is designed to expand the agencies existing programs by serving more students and adding volunteers, so it is aligned with core functions.
- The agency has good support from its partner school district. It does not have a full range of community partners to address student needs beyond the agency's areas of expertise; however, it has a goal of developing such partnerships and plans to develop at least one in the coming cycle.
- The agency has operated an AC program for the last three years and has presented a complete start-up plan. • The agency has a large number of volunteers in various capacities. Volunteers are tracked through a data base system and has plans to upgrade this system to better track volunteer hours and assign them an in-kind value. A staff member oversees volunteer applications and background checks with on-boarding done by program or administrative staff depending on the area volunteering in.
- Other comments:
 - The proposal is unclear as to how one AC member can mentor 50 students. Presume that much of this will be done in concert with other volunteers, but it really isn't well explained.
 - In the information on need, statistics are presented on demographics/poverty indicators for the area served with only a few state-wide/national comparisons. More comparison data would be useful on things like school performance.
 - The evidence base presented is extensive, but not helpfully formatted for the reviewer. Some of this might be a result of egrants formatting issues. Perhaps fewer citations with more specific information would improve this.
 - Statement that 100% of their 2020 cohort graduated was useful. More data on local results would strengthen proposal.
 - HAS tier three interventions not explained.
 - ED 9 – Sets an outcome of 30 students graduating and states 95% rate among their students. Confusing because the program is intended to serve 150. At 30 graduates a year, that results in 120 of the 150, which is not 95%.
 - Failure to include AmeriCorps in program name.
- Overall, the response to the RFP was not well organized and does not clearly address some areas. Some of this was filled in during the interview process, where new or improved information was provided. Of the 4 proposals, this is the only one where the interview provided significantly better insights into the program and its design/operation than was provided in the RFP response. As a result, the program is most likely stronger than it was presented in the written RFP response.
- Updating database will allow to strengthen volunteer impact evaluation.
- Formatting of their response and response to prompts was really inadequate