

Grant Proposal Report to Commission from Task Force

Recommendation: Fund if corrections can be negotiated

Legal Applicant: White Pine Programs **Project Name:** Nature-Based Intervention Initiative
White Pine & AmeriCorps

Category: AC Formula -- Standard **Type:** Planning
 AC Formula – Rural State Operating
 AC Competitive Fixed Amount
 Other Competition Cost Reimbursement
 Ed Award Only

Applicant type: New (no prior AC experience) **Proposed Dates:** 09/15/2024 to 09/14/2027
 Re-compete (# of yrs: __) Submitted request is for Yr [1]

Federal Focus Area: Healthy Futures **Commission priorities:** Public Health

Local Share Required in Budget: Yes No **Source of Funds detail required:** Yes No

Requested Resources: Funds and Slots (*indicates sections with calculation errors)

	CNCS		Local Share
Operating			
Member Support			
Indirect (Admin)			
CNCS Award amount	\$130,900	Total Local Share (cash + in-kind)	n/a
% sharing proposed	n/a		
% share required	n/a		
Cost-per-member proposed	\$37,400		
max allowed	\$27,000		

Total AmeriCorps Member Service Years: 3.5

		Slot Types Requested						
		1700	1200	900	675	450	300	Total
Slots With living allowance			5					
Living allowance proposed			\$22,000					
Slots with only ed award								

Program Description (executive summary):

The White Pine Programs proposes to have 5 AmeriCorps members who will deliver nature-based programming for youth and seniors in Kittery, York, Eliot, South/North Berwick, Sanford, Wells and the Kennebunks. The White Pine & AmeriCorps Nature-Based Intervention Initiative prioritizes addressing mental health challenges, especially among seniors and youth who disproportionately experience isolation, loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Rural areas like Maine face a shortage of mental health resources, compounded by limited transportation and decentralized healthcare, exacerbating these issues. By focusing on mental health support, we aim to alleviate suffering and promote well-being among vulnerable populations. At the end of the first program year, the AmeriCorps program will have meaningfully impacted the mental well-being of youth and seniors in these communities through boosted self confidence, building new relationships, and gathering in community outdoors. In addition, the AmeriCorps members will leverage an additional 100 community volunteers who will be engaged in providing nature-based programming such as facilitated recess and

workshops that build naturalist skills, focused on reducing loneliness, sadness and feelings of isolation. The AmeriCorps investment of \$130,900 will leverage \$298,300 comprised of \$0 in public funding and \$298,300 in private funding.

Service locations:

White Pines

Other than the legal applicant, please list the agencies or organizations that appear to be the major collaborators or partners in this grant.

Center for Active Living

Will the applicant place AmeriCorps members with other agencies? Yes No

Applicant proposes to deliver services:

Within a single municipality Within a single County but not covering the entire County
 County-wide in a single County Multiple Counties but not Statewide Statewide

Performance measures (targets proposed for Year 1; targets for years 2 and 3 set in continuations):

SERVICE ACTIVITIES

OUTPUT: H4A: Number of individuals served (youth)

Proposed target: 2,300 individuals

OUTCOME: Improved mental well-being, reduced anxiety & stress (youth)

Proposed target: 2,300 individuals

OUTPUT: H4A: Number of individuals served (seniors)

Proposed target: 300 individuals

OUTCOME: Reduced loneliness, isolation and fear of leaving home

Proposed target: 300 individuals

MEMBER DEVELOPMENT

Measures listed in the RFP not entered and targets were not proposed.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Measures listed in the RFP not entered and targets were not proposed.

Scoring Detail:

Peer Reviewer Consensus Score. *Assessment of narrative using point distribution from federal agency. Major categories (Program Design, Organizational Capability, Budget and Cost) are dictated by CFR rubric for scoring.*

CATEGORY	Rating	Points
Rationale & Approach/Program Design (50%)		
The Community and Need	Adequate	6
Logic Model	Adequate	6
Evidence of Effectiveness	Adequate	6
Funding Priority and Preferences	Weak	1.5
Member Training	Adequate	4.5
Member Supervision	Weak	3
Member Experience	Weak	3
Commitment to AmeriCorps Identification	Adequate	3.75
Organizational Capability Overall Rating 25%		
Organizational Background and Staffing	Adequate	13.5
Commitment to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion	Adequate	13.5
Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy 25%		
Member Recruitment	Weak	3.5
Member Retention	Weak	3.5
Data Collection	Weak	2.5
Budget Alignment to Program Design	Weak	3
	Total	73.25

Task Force Consensus Score. *The Task Force reviewers assess the additional technical criteria that states are directed to consider by the CFR.*

	Quality Rating	Score
Program Alignment (25%)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alignment with funding priorities 	Adequate	18.75
Program Model (10%)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serve communities described in 2522.450(c) 	Substandard	0.625
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposal adds to goal of being programmatically, demographically, and geographically diverse 	Adequate	1.875
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential for innovation and/or replication 	Adequate	1.875
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strength of evidence program can be sustained over time. 	Adequate	1.875
Preferences from RFP Announcement (15%)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposal submitted by an organization led by or primarily supporting or recruiting participants from historically marginalized communities and/or people. 	Weak	3.75
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> serve, counties classified as 6, 7, or 8 on the USDA rural-urban continuum 	Incomplete/ Nonresponsive	0
Past Performance (10%)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can comply with requirements, info consistent with other grant administrator's info, consistent with externally verified past performance 	Adequate	7.5

Financial Plan (10%)	Weak	5
Fiscal Systems (15%)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity of Financial mgt system to comply with fed requirements 	Adequate	3.75
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strength of orgz financial mgt practices as evidenced by audits, etc. 	Adequate	3.75
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strength of sponsor orgs financial status/stability per audit, 990, etc. 	Adequate	3.75
Grant Readiness (15%)		
Start-up plan is detailed, complete, and demonstrates ability to stand up the program on time with resources in place (including staff leadership).	Adequate	5.625
Applicant's systems, policies, experience, partnerships, leadership support, financial and personnel resources, etc. are fully prepared to implement the program as of the start date.	Adequate	5.625
Total Task Force Score		63.751
Peer Review Score		73.25
Final Score for Applicant (200 possible)		137.001

Final Assessment of Application:

- Forward or fund with no corrections/modifications
- Forward or fund with corrections/modifications
- Do Not Forward or fund

Referenced Conditions/Corrections

Funding request exceeds maximum Cost per MSY by \$10,000 per MSY.

Performance measures are missing for capacity building and member development. Service activity performance measures need re-examination. They appear to cover the entire agency's programming and not just the AmeriCorps portion. They are also confusing when it come to distinguishing seniors from youth.

Peer Reviewer Notes and Appraisal Summary:

Section: Program Design (50 %)

The Community and Need

- The grant proposal demonstrates clear understanding of the need and the impact to the community. The project highlights the shortages of mental health care, leading to increase in mental health challenges, especially in youth and seniors. The application addresses the lack of transportation in rural Maine, preventing these vulnerable populations to connect. Since 2020, White Pines has been collaborating with schools, community center, etc. to provide these services.
- The application does not attest to the veracity of a rural designation as provided in the Americorps RFA.
- Although statistics are provided concerning mental health issues for seniors and students, I would have preferred specific sources for the percentages of seniors and students affected. And, since historic references are not provided, we do not have evidence that the recent events have created the worst mental health crisis in history. (the plagues of Europe? The Hundred Year Wars? WWII? The French Revolution?)

Logic Model

- The applicant did a great job providing the information for the Logic table. The information is clear and concise. The information provided goes more in-depth then the narratives and provides the reviewer with a more in-depth understanding of the project.
- The application does not identify any measurable outcomes linked to the required National Performance Outcome Measure. Additionally, the applicant states they will conduct their interventions in their current set of schools which are not identified. There is no way to determine in this application whether or not those schools fall in the federal designated rural areas as previously discussed.
- I don't quite see how 5 people are going to provide services enough to alleviate loneliness, and school yard bullying for 2300 people, and they don't really explain it to me.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Strength of evidence

- This application did a great job pulling in information from peer-reviewed reports and other supporting entities to bolster their nature-based project. As stated in their narrative from Beyond Blue, mental health can be impacted by nature. Another article published in the Journal of Pediatrics cites the benefits children gain from nature play.
- The applicant addresses the question of effectiveness adequately. Citing experts who have stood up similar model programs such as Americorps would have garnered additional points.
- Only one study is quoted as supporting the mental health benefits of nature based activities. I'm sure there are more. I am also concerned about the stereotyping in the statement that nature based activities are a "simple solution for so many ailments in older adults, but without the opportunity to be in a group setting, most won't make the effort." Is there an evidence base for that statement?

Overall Comments

- There were numerous sources that were provided to justify their case in this nature-based project. All of these sources presented from throughout the country support their project model and the effects that it will have on the community that will be involved.
- The applicant used an adequate number of reliable third-party sources who provided compelling evidence. However, WPP has been operational since 2020, and this reviewer would have provided additional points if survey results from its own programs were supplied.
- Again, I am concerned with the generalizations. Citations are incomplete. When were studies done? Where can I look them up?

Funding Priority and Preferences

- This narrative scores 'adequate' on funding priority and preferences because while it aligns with the priority of addressing public health and workforce development needs, it lacks specificity and depth in demonstrating how the proposed program will directly address these priorities. While mentioning mental health support and skill development across various disciplines is commendable, more concrete details and measurable outcomes related to how the program will contribute to these priorities would strengthen the proposal. Additionally, providing evidence or data to support the assertion that the program will effectively address isolation, loneliness, and emotional distress would enhance its credibility. Overall, while the narrative touches on relevant themes, it could benefit from greater clarity and specificity to fully meet the funding requirements and priorities. I would have like to see more specific demographic data for the area to support this narrative.
- The applicant does not demonstrate that its proposal meets all requirements of either of the Commission's two funding preferences as it neither attests to its intervention locations in Americorps designated rural counties, nor describes how it will recruit volunteers from populations its program is intended to serve.
- If the concern is to reach out to inactive seniors, to improve mental and physical health, how will outreach be done to seniors who are not already participating in the Center for Active Living? Or is the program directed only for those already active?

Member Training

- The member training narrative is solid. It is very well thought out and follows an existing training model that White Pines Program uses. They are not having to reinvent the wheel for these 5 additional volunteers they are requesting to bring on. This to me is a great approach and will help with them to seamlessly transition into the already existing activities.
- The application does not adequately address member training. The applicant fails to mention how members will be trained for special needs of their target populations, for example, mobility assists, commonly used by seniors.
- Again generalizations: What will members be able to list on their resumes? How many hours of training will I be given, in what areas, if I am in this program?

Member Supervision

- The applicant has a strong approach to member supervision. The AmeriCorps members will be mentored by a senior staff member to help them develop skills and be supported in their new working environment instead of being led in the project, which is something I like about it. As mentioned in the narrative, I am a big believer in routine check-ins to make sure that both parties' experiences are valued and that any problems are resolved.
- This section neither states that a WPP supervisor is in place (though that is mentioned in a separate section) nor does it discuss any training of any supervisors – in partner organizations or in WPP.
- The schools participating in the program are not mentioned. And the teachers who will be supervising members will be important to the members, but their qualifications are not specified, nor do we know if they have experience or training in supervising adults.

Member Experience

- This narrative would score 'strong' on a member experience grant review because it demonstrates a profound commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity within the organization. By actively promoting a diverse workforce and creating an inclusive environment, White Pine ensures that AmeriCorps members from all backgrounds feel valued and supported. The explicit acknowledgment of systemic discrimination and the organization's stance against it sets a clear tone for a safe and respectful workplace. Additionally, the emphasis on continuous learning and growth through various opportunities, mentorship programs, and feedback mechanisms highlights a genuine investment in the development and well-being of AmeriCorps members. Overall, this narrative portrays White Pine as a supportive and empowering environment for service leaders to thrive and make meaningful contributions to their communities.
- The applicant does not discuss any recruitment techniques to ensure diversity, instead taking a passive posture on this important matter.
- Again, I am concerned with the lack of specificity. What will I be able to do when I complete my term that I was not able to do before?

Commitment to AmeriCorps Identification

- This narrative scores 'strong' on an AmeriCorps Identification grant review because it demonstrates a comprehensive approach to integrating AmeriCorps members into the organization and ensuring their visibility within the community. By providing thorough orientation and registration processes specifically tailored to AmeriCorps requirements, White Pine ensures members are equipped with the necessary knowledge and tools to represent the program effectively. The commitment to visibly identifying members through branded clothing and introductions during program events fosters a sense of unity and recognition within the organization. Moreover, the proactive communication strategy, including press releases, newsletters, and social media promotion, effectively amplifies the presence of AmeriCorps within the organization's activities, enhancing awareness and appreciation of their contributions both locally and beyond.
- The applicant adequately addresses through identification of marketing opportunities how it will ensure AmeriCorps identification in its proposed program.
- AmeriCorps is included in the name of the program, and members will wear AmeriCorps branded clothing.

Organizational Capability.

Organizational Background and Staffing

- This narrative earns a 'strong' score on an organizational background and staffing grant review due to its comprehensive alignment with organizational strategic goals and mission. The extensive experience and qualifications of key staff members, including the Executive Director and Volunteer Coordinator, showcase strong leadership and management capabilities. The diverse composition of the leadership team and board reflects a commitment to inclusivity and representation. Collaboration between board and staff members in

identifying areas of impact underscores a cohesive approach to goal-setting and program development. The organization's successful volunteer program, despite challenges, and its proactive efforts to expand partnerships demonstrate adaptability and community engagement. Additionally, the commitment to ongoing training and professional development highlights a dedication to staff and program quality. Overall, White Pine's robust organizational structure, strategic planning, and inclusive culture position it well for effective implementation and long-term sustainability of AmeriCorps initiatives.

- The application does not identify the percentage of time the WPP Project Coordinator will spend supervising the AmeriCorps volunteers. This is a required response item.
- I would have liked more information about the staff supervising the five members, but there seem to be enough people to do the supervision. They seem to have been well enough organized to have gained support from grants and their communities before applying for the grant.

Commitment to DEIA

- This narrative scores 'strong' on the commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility grant review due to its comprehensive approach to representation and inclusion. The organization's leadership and staff composition reflect the diverse lived experiences of the community, ensuring that various perspectives are heard and valued. By prioritizing inclusivity beyond racial diversity and considering metrics such as economic status, adverse childhood experiences, neurodiversity, gender identity, and sexual orientation, the organization demonstrates a deep commitment to serving all members of the community. Furthermore, the emphasis on regular bias training, feedback sessions, and employee surveys highlights a proactive effort to create a supportive and safe environment for individuals with diverse backgrounds, fostering a culture of equity and belonging.
- This application does not discuss any definitions of DEIA, nor does not mention any policies or procedures on this important topic. Most concerning, there is no discussion of accessibility. Meeting ADA requirements in site locations will be required as a recipient of federal funds. With no discussion from the applicant on this topic, the reader can only conclude that the applicant is unaware of these requirements.
- "Representation of our community's diversity on our staff, board and volunteer pool, in addition to regular bias training, feedback sessions and employee surveys ensure that we do our best to create a supportive and safe environment for individuals with diverse backgrounds."

Budget Adequacy and Cost Effectiveness.

Member Recruitment

- Within the narrative, the applicant is utilizing every avenue for engagement for recruitment. This includes direct outreach at fairs, farmers markets, schools, colleges, etc.
- This section of the application adequately describes recruitment techniques that have a reasonable probability of matching members to target communities
- I really didn't understand the narrative. And I wonder how they can assure that Recruited members will seamlessly integrate into our close-knit White Pine community." In my experience, entering a close knit community is often not seamless, but requires a period of adjustment on the part of the individual joining, and the community being joined.

Member Retention

- The applicant does not provide enough information as to how they will retain these members. They describe including them in comprehensive training, mentoring and networking. Though very little else is given on this topic,.
- This section adequately identifies a variety of member retention techniques.
- Do they want members to stay for the 3 years the the organization will be eligible for refunding? It wasn't clear to me how that was going to happen. I'm also concerned that York County may have housing costs that cannot be covered by a nine month stipend.

Data Collection

- This portion of the budget narrative is 'adequate'. The applicant discusses surveys and AmeriCorps program updates with the board and leadership staff.
- The applicant does not include any discussion of a process for conducting continuous improvement activities and evaluation of the program by members and the community.
- It looks as though they are planning to use a variety of surveys of participants to assess their success. How do they survey elementary students: just curious.

Budget Alignment to Program Design

- There is very little information within the narrative on this topic. Though they do provide a better breakdown under the "Source of Funds" section on page 26. I still would have liked to see a little more written within the narrative on this particular topic.
- The application does not state affirmatively that the local match funds are secured. Also, these local funds, which are primarily user-based, are presumably already dedicated to existing programs. This could cause a supplantation issue.
- I didn't understand this part of their narrative.

SUMMARY APPRAISAL 1. Having reviewed all elements of the proposal provided to you, do you think that this applicant would be effective in this category of grant? Yes (1) No (2)

Comments:

- This applicant has scored in the 'strong' category on many of the proposal benchmarks. It was well written clean and concise. Reading their proposal, I can easily see their vision and what they would like to achieve with their project. They had strong supporting documentation cited under the 'evidence' section, which reinforces the outcomes of projects like this one being proposed.
- Without sufficient controls to ensure the applicant will only use funds in intervention locations that meet the rural definitions in the RFA, this applicant may be very difficult to manage, risking non-compliance audit findings that could reflect poorly on the Commission. Further, this applicant does not include any discussion of accessibility accommodations for volunteers and program participants. ADA compliance is required in accepting federal funds and based on this reading, some of the sites, including the forest, do not have compliant accommodations.
- I wish there were a maybe...Because I love the goals of nature based programs. But the application does not tell me precisely what the members will be doing and where they will be doing it. Will members be assigned to the different schools, or will they be moving between them? And if they are working in schools, are they not being "outsourced, rather than working for White Pines?"
- Overall, a fantastic proposal and, moreover, a great project for the community. I do wish to see more of this in the state, for not only youth but seniors that have limited accessibility.
- This applicant currently manages programs with substantial private funding and yet it has no experience managing government funding. In order for this applicant to be successful, this reviewer recommends WPP consider withdrawing this application and instead applying for a planning grant which will help WPP develop institutional competence to manage, hopefully many, many government grant awards in the future. However, if the applicant cannot provide ADA compliant accommodations for all of its programs, and demonstrate Title VI conformity, it would be advised to continue to use private funds exclusively.
- This is a "big picture" application. I would like to see what a "detail" person would write.

What elements of the proposal are unclear?

- The only true unclear area of this proposal is the last section. Primarily revolving around what they will do to retain members once recruited.
- The four standout issues are: 1) do all proposed intervention locations meet rural definitions as provided in the RFA; 2) are all sites ADA compliant and do the programs conform to Title VI requirements; 3) are the

local funds committed and if yes, are they already assigned to existing programs; and 4) what percent of time will WPP's Project Coordinator spend on supervising the proposed AmeriCorps volunteers.

- The application does not tell me precisely what the members will be doing and where they will be doing it. Will members be assigned to the different schools, or will they be moving between them? And if they are working in schools, are they not being "outsourced, rather than working for White Pines?

Task Force Review Notes and Appraisal Summary:

Proposal Alignment Program Model

- All responses are adequate - except that the strength of the program can be sustained over time - the budget over the past few years, has gone up and down, so much - so no predictability or dependable picture. White Pine's Budget for staff is now more costly to be consistent - sometimes having volunteers in key positions, can be unpredictable. Thus a bigger salary for staff - good explanation to explain this.
- The program addresses the areas of Healthy Futures and the Commission's of Public Health and Workforce. York County does not meet the definition of a distressed community, although some work may be done in areas that do face some challenges. While the program is similar to several other AC programs that relate to outdoor education, the program's focus is somewhat different in that it addresses isolation and loneliness among youth and seniors and tries to provide programming that are multi-generational. This is a somewhat innovative approach that could be replicated elsewhere. The location of the program in southern Maine does not add significantly to our served geography. The program is well aligned with the mission of its sponsor. Over the past few years, the organization has expanded its efforts from operating an outdoor school to partnering with a variety of agencies and organizations to bring its programs to them where they are. The AC members are intended to simply expand this effort and to continue in the same vein of providing programs to folks where they are, while still offering some location bound services. What they have found is the demand for their programs is exceeding their staff ability to meet. It appears that a set of strong relationships already exist. The local share will be covered primarily through program revenues along with several small grants that are pending but not assured. Since much of the program is fee for service, offerings must address perceived and actual needs of its stakeholders and clients. Program leadership seems to be fairly stable with the Executive Director indicating that her current plans are to stay with the organization for some time. The Assistant Director appears to be a long-term employee. The program is relatively stable financially although the 990 does show it operated at a loss in the last year. The additional expenses associated with new staff have not been covered by revenues, although the agency hopes to address that through program growth and grants such as this. The program has experience in utilizing volunteers and as improving its volunteer management effort by bringing on board a volunteer manager who is currently part-time and whom they hope to move to full-time. This individual has been improving their tracking of volunteers and their hours and is working on areas of needed policy.

Preferences from RFA

- York is not rural by USDA codes, hence a weak vote.
- The proposal is not from a partnership or coalition, although it does work closely with a number of other organizations; while it is not lead by historically marginalized individuals, it does attempt to serve them through its programs. These groups include seniors and children facing social/emotional challenges

Past Performance

- Gave an adequate vote to #15, but I was varying between Weak & Adequate because there were not alot of past performance reports to see, just mostly verbal reports.
- The agency has no federal grant experience and limited experience managing grants of any kind. This was somewhat ameliorated by the interview which included the agency's outside bookkeeper who appears to have considerable grant accounting experience. The agency has historically had a relatively large volunteer base and has either implemented or is working on implementing the various best practices for volunteer management. Of note, they have brought a volunteer manager on-board part-time. I rated this category weak due to the lack of specific grant experience; given the interview, could move up to adequate.

Financial Plan

- I was trying to decide between weak and adequate, but seeing the 6 year comparison of budget, and how White Pine survived pre pandemic, during and post - with no major variances - made me feel more comfortable to respond adequate. Most costs seem realistic, and the higher salary for staff question I wondered about was answered to my satisfaction (see previous comments).
- The biggest issue here is the cost per member year has been calculated incorrectly as if the 5 members were full time rather than 1200 hour positions. This needs to be corrected. Otherwise, the proposal is adequate in that it exceeds match requirements and are from acceptable sources, primarily from fee for service.

Fiscal Systems

- Professional Audit not done because they have not had a federal grant before - but seems like they have done informal audits throughout the years - so my vote is incomplete on #23. Adequate for both questions about Survey responses done/completed, and a 990 completed.
- The financial system appears to be capable of accounting for the grant funds. The biggest issue is that the agency has no direct experience with federal or complex foundation grants. This always raises a caution flag. Most of my concerns were allayed by the interview where the bookkeeper/accounting firm representative was present and spoke to her experience in grant accounting and requirements and her role in the agency. While the agency has limited experience, she seems to be capable of filling that gap. It should also be noted that the agency does not been audited and it was not clear when their last outside financial review was done. The 990 supports that the agency is relatively stable, although it did operate at a loss the last two years.

Grant Readiness

- I would like to see this program succeed and think that some of their changes will be helpful in the fall where they are weak. I think having the AmeriCorps members will be helpful and joyful.
- Adequate is my answer to 26, but the category isn't there so I checked strong as holding answer. The start-up plan seems ok, although it relies heavily on the new volunteer manager. The program has been around for some time, and survived the challenge of the pandemic where it transitioned its programs from primarily on their own property to being offered at partnership organizations. While there is some risk in funding this program, I believe it is capable of performing. Note: In addition to budget issues, the performance output and outcome measures need some work given they seem to be projecting a 100% success rate. I'm also not sure if the output measure is based on the work of the entire agency or that of the AC members.