

Grant Proposal Report to Commission from Task Force

Recommendation: Forward with no corrections

Legal Applicant: Maine Conservation Corps

Program Name:

- Category:** AC Formula -- Standard
 AC Formula – Rural State
 AC Competitive
 Other Competition

- Type:** Planning
 Operating
 Fixed Amount
 Ed Award Only

Federal Focus Area:

Local Share Required: Yes No

Applicant type: New

Proposed Dates: 1 / 1/2026 to 12 /31 /2026

Re-compete

Submitted request is for Yr 1

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

	CNCS		Local Share
Operating	1,234,000.00		N/A
Member Support	0		
Indirect (Admin)	0		
CNCS Award amount	\$1,234,000.00	Total Local Share (cash + in-kind)	
% sharing proposed	N/A		
% share required	28%		
Cost-per-member proposed	\$25,000		
max allowed	\$27,000		

Total AmeriCorps Member Service Years:

	Slot Types Requested						
	1700	1200	900	675	450	300	Total
Slots With living allowance	15	12	14	32		32	

Program Description (executive summary):

The Maine Conservation Corps will have 105 AmeriCorps members in all sixteen counties of Maine. AmeriCorps members will be the providers and beneficiaries of service, completing vital environmental stewardship and capacity-building activities, while receiving workforce development and bridgebuilding skills training. Team-based placements will focus on recreational trail rehabilitation and habitat restoration; Individual Placement members will be engaged in ecological monitoring, environmental education, shoreline stabilization, community forestry projects, and volunteer management. At the end of the first program year, the AmeriCorps members will be responsible for treating or constructing 200 miles of trail and providing capacity-building services to 20 host sites. In addition, the AmeriCorps members will leverage 600 volunteers who will be engaged in environmental stewardship interventions to perpetuate the efforts of members. In addition to the AmeriCorps investment, \$1,019,220 in public funding and \$505,500 in private funding will support the project.

Service locations:

DEP Watershed, DEP Biomonitoring, Harpswell Heritage Land Trust, Viles Arboretum, Acadia National Park, Rachel Carson Wildlife Refuge, City of Ellsworth, City of Portland, Washington Academy, ReTree US, Somerset Woods Trustees, Baxter State Park, Presumpscot Regional Land Trust, Hurricane Island, Mount Blue State Park, Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands, Downeast Coastal Conservancy, Falmouth Land Trust, Loon Echo Land Trust,

Maine Woodland Owners, New England Forestry Foundation, Orono Land Trust, Somerset Woods Trustees, The Nature Conservancy, Western Foothills Land Trust and Androscoggin Land Trust

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

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: Miles of trails or rivers treated
Proposed target: 200 miles

Outcome: Miles of trails or rivers improved
Proposed target: 180 miles

MEMBER DEVELOPMENT

Output: Number of AmeriCorps program training and other formal development activities that result in increased AmeriCorps member skills, knowledge and abilities related to the service assignment (community, tasks, and sector)
Proposed Target: 5

Outcome: Number of AmeriCorps members demonstrating increased competency in skills or application of knowledge
Proposed Target: 50

CAPACITY BUILDING

Output: Number of organizations that received capacity building services
Proposed target: 20

Outcome: Number of organizations that increase their efficiency, effectiveness, and/or program reach
Proposed target: 15

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.*

	Quality Rating	Score
Program Design		
Theory of Change & Logic Model	Strong	24
Evidence tier – category points	Moderate	9
Evidence quality	Strong	8
Notice Priority	Adequate	0
Member Experience	Adequate	4.5
Organizational Capability		
Organizational Background & Staffing	Strong	15
Compliance/Accountability	Adequate	3
Member Supervision	Strong	6
Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy	Strong	25
Evaluation Plan	N/A	
Total Peer Reviewer Score		94.5

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 Model		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alignment of community need targeted and funding priorities 	Adequate	2.81
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent to which proposal will serve specified communities and add to diversity of Commission's portfolio 	Adequate	2.81
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposal is innovative use of AmeriCorps and might be replicated 	Strong	3.75
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence the program can be sustained beyond initial start up 	Adequate	2.81
Past Performance		
<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	3.75
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RECOMPETE ONLY: applicant used member positions 	Adequate	2.81
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RECOMPETE ONLY: used financial resources allocated 	Adequate	2.81
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RECOMPETE ONLY: implemented program effectively 	Strong	3.75
Financial Plan	Strong	15
Fiscal Systems		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity of Financial mgt system to comply with fed requirements 	Strong	8.33
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strength of orgz financial mgt practices as evidenced by audits, etc. 	Strong	8.33
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strength of sponsor orgs financial status/stability per audit, 990, etc. 	Strong	8.33
Total Task Force Score		65.30
Peer Review Score		94.5
Final Score for Applicant (160 possible)		159.80

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

The following proposal issues need to be clarified or, in the case of missing required elements, added.

Peer Reviewer Notes and Appraisal Summary:

Theory of change and logic model

- Logic Model inputs and outputs are specific and well-defined and include a method for tracking. The need, activities, and goals all flow together and make sense.
- Many of Maine's local, state, federal, private & quasi-public land management entities are not providing state-of-the-art practices necessary for sustainable trail design and maintenance. Challenges to this model include merely basic routine maintenance, lack of skills and knowledge, and origins prior to sustainable trail design practices. Increasingly, nationally sustainable trails include trail grades, slope alignment, drainage features, and tread hardening. Expanded resources and a willingness to adopt and engage in new techniques are necessary. MCC proposed project activities improves quality of trails, reduces trail erosion, water drainage, and informal trails. The goal is to increase trail sustainability and improvise trail experiences with minimal impact to the environment. Maine communities score medium to high risk in CDC social vulnerability indices, Climate and economic justice screening show some areas in the entire state to be overburdened and underserved.(P. 2). Because Maine has the oldest, per capita population in the US, including an aging workforce and outmigration, workforce development is an ongoing challenge to address the need. Effects of climate change exacerbate the challenges of maintaining high quality trails. An improved workforce will help create skilled employees & volunteers to emphasize environmental stewardship and protect habitats, waterways, and ecosystems that contribute to economic well-being of state.
- The applicant has made a good case for how the project can have a positive impact on the forests and shores of Maine. Data on the number and type of projects completed was extensive. The roles of both the paid employees and volunteers was clearly explained. However, the applicant did not make a strong case for how the grant activities will impact local communities. It seems like a link is missing. The applicant discusses a collaboration with the Maine Department of Education to help in the development of a workforce and discusses how the agency has established connections to regional communities but did not clearly show how the grant activities will address job creation, poverty, and land usage in such a way that communities will benefit. The logic model is very strong overall, especially in its goals for environmental stewardship and workforce development. Numerous evaluations have been identified and appear to be appropriate. However, there is no list of specific sites where the work will be completed or the communities that will host events. Although evaluation of long-term objectives is not required, it might enhance the understanding of the value of the project if a one year follow-up on participants' employment and/or educational pursuits would be included.

Evidence Tier

- Evidence 1 (PLSC Report) closely aligned with the applicant's program and showed strong evidence for positive outcomes related to building capacity related to environmental stewardship. Evidence 2 (WSC) aligned with the applicant's plans for member development – providing members with training, developing skills, etc. However, related to #4 above, the applicant's narrative section did not explain how these study interventions were the same as the intervention in their application – I had to determine that myself. The evidence for the program's effects on environmental stewardship, which is the focus area of this program, was less convincing, and the study was conducted by the applicant (not an independent entity).
- Studies used by MCC (Public Lands Service Coalition: Partnership Impact Evaluation; Washington Service Corps: Program Evaluation Report and MCC Trail Rehabilitation) proposed project model (Application, P.3-5). This includes emphasis on activities promoting capacity building, member development, environmental stewardship.
- The applicant has included appropriate evaluation reports that address many of the goals of the proposed project. The methodology appears to be appropriate to evaluate most of the proposed outcomes of the project. The logic model describes some measures of workforce development, but

additional evaluations of the outcomes of workforce training activities and community impact would be desirable.

Evidence Quality

- See response above.
- Studies used by MCC (Public Lands Service Coalition: Partnership Impact Evaluation; Washington Service Corps: Program Evaluation Report and MCC Trail Rehabilitation) proposed project model (Application, P.3-5). This includes emphasis on activities promoting capacity building, member development, environmental stewardship.
- The reports are appropriate.

Notice Priority

- Page 9 of RFA lists “Disaster Services, Economic Opportunity, Education, Environmental Stewardship, Healthy Futures, Veterans and Military Families, and Capacity Building” however, the narrative states “NOTICE PRIORITY: The proposed program fits within the following AmeriCorps funding priorities: rural and underrepresented communities, environmental stewardship, civic bridgebuilding, additional member benefits, workforce pathways, and the American Climate Corps.” -- those do not match what I see in the RFA, so this is confusing to me. Also, while the program clearly fits within all categories the applicant listed, and also clearly fits within one or more of the RFA funding priorities, that particular section of the narrative does not describe HOW the project fits into those funding priorities. The rest of the narrative makes it clear, but it is not called out in the “Notice Priority” section. Although, to be fair: The RFA does not instruct applicant to describe “how” (as the assessment criteria below indicates) – the RFA only says the application should “indicate whether the proposed program fits within one or more of the” funding priorities. Also, the RFA link that the applicant would have viewed does not work for me (it only states “see page Error! Bookmark not defined”) so I am unsure if the priorities from page 9 of the RFA are the same as where this link would have brought the applicant.
- MCC’s proposed project are consistent with National AmeriCorps priorities for rural and underrepresented communities, environmental stewardship, civic bridgebuilding, environmental benefits, workforce benefits and American Climate Corps. (Application: P. 1)
- Four priorities identified

Member Experience

- Extremely strong narrative regarding how members will be provided with leadership and skill development opportunities – list very specific subjects, a program consisting of over 50 trainings, workshops, events, etc. Unfortunately, the description of how members will be provided with orientation to the community was weak – it was not specific other than “through immersion and direct engagement” and that section of the narrative went on to describe other aspects of the community partners but NOT how members would be oriented.
- MCC program stresses both instructional and hands member experiences. (Application: P. 5-6) There is a wide array of skill building activities including bridge building, soft skills, technical skills, job readiness, professional certifications in industry sector. Member training is delivered by subject matter experts, professional trainers and in-house staff. “Life After AmeriCorps”, community orientation demonstrates the importance of member relationship building for members, residents and others. Members are immersed in critical MCC topics including environmental stewardship, capacity building, and workforce development.
- The narrative says that team members will be immersed in the community but does not describe how this will be accomplished.

Organizational Capability.

Organizational Background and Staffing

- Clearly outlines the position titles/roles and responsibilities for all key staff, and which positions supervise. Mission is clear, and relevant experience is well-defined with quantitative data included (500 community volunteers, over 1000 community connections and contacts, etc.) and specific examples on overcoming challenges (economy, pandemic, etc.). Grant experience is also strongly outlined with specific detail and examples of a long history. Strong educational/workforce development programs are specified.
- MCC has been delivering programs and services of this kind since 1983 (51 years). The MCC director is responsible for grant administration, program policies & procedures, compliance, budget/fiscal management, data collection/evaluation and supervision of leadership. Agency and program management includes program managers, training coordinator, office associate. Specific roles and responsibilities are outlined in great detail in project narrative (p.6 – 9). Systems and business practices, as well as successful project management strategies and success, are described in great and convincing details.
- The applicant has an extensive management team with the capability of implementing and monitoring the project. In addition, the team has extensive grant management experience.

Member Supervision

- Staff to member ratio is defined, frequency of check-ins is defined, frequency and mode of feedback/evaluation is defined. Tools to assess are defined. Project liaison will be assigned. Training and assessment of supervisors is well-described.
- MCC project model has a 1:3 staff to member ratio and members have continuous and consistent interaction with supervisors. Members complete quarterly reports as a self-description of experiences with supervisors, meetings, growth opportunities, training needs and measurements toward meeting personal goals and organization capacity building. (Application p. 8-9). MCC has specific guidelines and feedback to members on expectations, feedback, technical skills (reports, geo-referenced data) as well as feedback from host sites about members.
- A proposed 1-3 staff to member ratio should provide more than adequate supervision of project activities. A project liaison will outline the scope and goals of the project.

Section: Cost and Budget Adequacy (25 %)

- Report they receive 500 applicants annually, that is impressive. They list % of time spent on recruitment and budgetary value, they list a lot of ways to recruit and locations/agencies they recruit from. For these reasons I would rate this section STRONG; however, I reduce my rating to adequate because:
 - 1. While they list a lot of strategies to aid in the cost of living such as looking for host sites that offer low or no-cost housing and vehicles, and working with related state department for supplemental food assistance, they state “Members in the same position description receive an identical weekly stipend, above the federal minimum, regardless of service location in Maine.” --- this does not accommodate for regional variations (it may be more expensive to live in Portland than in Dover-Foxcroft, for example) which is one of the assessment criteria below.
 - 2. Team-based placements are provided with basecamp to live at during time off and assigned a leased vehicle, also provided with supplies from a “gear closet”, but how is that paid for?
- Recruitment occurs 11 months of the year and staff devotes 10% of time, valued at \$67,000, to accomplish. Recruitment involves in-state travel outreach events and presentations, online recruitment through social media, service-oriented sites (including AmeriCorps, American Climate Corps, The Corps Network), job boards (conservation job board, handshake, Queer Outdoors) and connecting with youth serving institutions including Maine foster care and juvenile justice systems. MCC is sensitive to cost of living and works with host sites to offer low or no cost housing and works

with Maine Dept of Health & Human Services for youth to apply for food assistance. Further, they assist youth with clothing and other material supports. (Application, p. 10)

- The applicant proposes to use a variety of media to recruit members. The stipend for service is above the State average.

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 (X) No ()

Comments:

- I scored most elements of this proposal as “strong”. The details of the proposal are well thought-out and the model for environmental remediation/at-risk ecosystems, member development, and community capacity-building is detailed and thorough. Applicant has a strong policy structure and agency capacity, they demonstrate ability to use AmeriCorps resources effectively.
- MCC has strongly demonstrated both its capacity (p. 6) and commitment to undertake this multi dimensional program. In the “rationale and approach/program design” (p. 2-3) it underscores a macro perspective; that is helping “create skilled workers and volunteers to maximize and expand environmental stewardship.” They are data driven in their decision making and program design citing national studies (p. 3-4). Their commitment to member experience (p. 5 – 6) and DEIA (p. 9) show values to promote individual success.
- The applicant has a deep knowledge of the needs of the State for environmental management and resource development. The applicant has an existing strong network of volunteers that will enhance the work of the paid members. The evaluation plan is comprehensive and appropriate for most of the objectives of the project. The applicant has described a series of educational and work force development activities that has the potential to impact individual members as well as local communities. The applicant has a strong management team with the experience to implement and monitor a large project.

What elements of the proposal are unclear?

- Comments within sections I scored less than “strong” explain.
- Proposal was thorough, addressed the application requirements and nothing was unclear.
- It is not clear how the applicant plans to partner with communities and economic development partners to ensure that the resources that will be improved by this project can be utilized for the economic benefit of local communities.

What else do you have to say about this proposal?

- Nothing at this time.
- The Logic Model (p. 22-28) was the most organized and comprehensive I’ve ever experienced. NOTE: In my 20+ years of grants management, this is the gold standard. The entire application was well-organized and presented with sufficient targeted information, without providing excessive or tangential information.
- NA

Task Force Review Notes and Appraisal Summary:

Program Model. *This section’s criteria relate to alignment of proposal with funding priorities in RFP, significance of program in the context of statewide issues, the applicant’s readiness to take on a significant cadre of volunteers (AmeriCorps members) and it’s demonstrated ability to engage volunteers, and the match between the program traits and Commission funding goals.*

- Adequate ratings for most because the models and theory are fairly well defined & specific, but each section could use more knowledge and skill in many aspects. Picked adequate as they will be ok - as they have a good direction, but they will have some challenges, as stated in the reports with basic routine maintenance, and knowing a lot about sustainable trail design practices before they

start their terms. Strong with the Question 7 because they are geographically and demographically present all around the state in many counties.

- Program addresses environmental stewardship and economic opportunity priorities adequately, although not in enough detail in regard to potential employment opportunities and impact of the stewardship elements of the program, which seem to be subsidiary to the trail effort. The program probably will serve communities in the target distressed categories given the nature and likely location of the work. They are not, however, specified, so this must be assumed. In addition, the program itself is unlikely to directly address the conditions that underlying community distress. The program is not particularly unique given the Commission's frequent funding of programs aimed at environmental stewardship. Its geographical coverage is, however, much broader and will reach areas that likely do not have other AC programs. The sustainability of the program speaks for itself given its long history, state support, congruence with the mission of its home state department, and the experience of assigned state staff.
- Narrative provides good historical perspective

Assessment of Past Performance

- Picked Adequate for all options. Works with other community partners such as Volunteer Maine for example - which is a great idea - looks to them for guidance on compliance, regulations, and marketing, etc; Also, adequate with operating in the rural counties, or historically marginalized counties. All counties represented so good job with this - getting around the state. Good basic adequate job.
- While there are a large number of partners involved in this program, it is not formally from a partnership. While the applicant has addressed DEI issues in its application, it is not led by or primarily supporting historically marginalized communities or people, although some of its participants may be from such communities. It is likely that many of the projects and stewardship opportunities will be in rural counties; however, locations are not specified.
- Demographics are target throughout the state.

Assessment of Financial Plan

- This program has a long history and is supported by a state agency that supplies significant staff and supervisory support and has repeatedly shown the ability to provide the local funds necessary for the program to be successful. The program has also generally met its performance targets, although those have almost universally been related to the trail portion of the effort and capacity building of partner organizations. It would be nice to see some data/information on the stewardship element of the program such as projects undertaken and completed and volunteers recruited and hours volunteered. I should also noted that it is good to see the improved recruitment numbers as the program moves past the negative impact of the pandemic. It's clear that a strong effort is being made to return to historic recruitment rates.
- Not really sure of accuracy of how funds have been used.

Fiscal Systems

- Picked Adequate, as they are ok - average. Operational costs seem ok, providing sufficient resources to implement the program adequately. Expense reports were submitted on an irregular basis at times, and so were the progress reports - a little bit late. However seems adequate they were complete, and ok. Federal requirements seems ok - they have guidance from Volunteer Maine, and others.

- This is a fixed amount grant. Unlike most applicants, the proposal provides detailed information on local resources that will support the program. The applicant is a Department in the state of Maine that operates a financial management system that meets federal grant requirements. It's financial strength is tied to that of the state
- Good financial plan and justification. Good accountability systems in place

Do you think that this applicant would be effective in this category of grant? YES (X)

What else do you have to say about this proposal?

- Adequate ratings throughout for start up plans, but I was kind of between week and adequate for the applicants "experience" section of it - finally decided on adequate as they do have some great partnerships and connections, and some bridgebuilding skills, and good volunteer management practices that I think will be helpful!
- This is a long-standing successful program that has a history of solid management and performance.
- Appears to have the proper infrastructure in place to manage and support program