

Grant Proposal Report to Commission from Task Force

Recommendation: Forward to national competition with support for request only if corrections can be completed.

Legal Applicant: Maine Conservation Corps

Program Name: Maine Conservation Corps

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

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

Federal Focus Area: Environmental Stewardship

- Applicant type:** New (no prior AC experience)
 Re-compete (# of yrs: 25)

Proposed Dates: 01/01/2022 to 12/31/2024
 Submitted budget, slot request, etc. is for Yr 1

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

	CNCS		Local Share
Operating	N/A		N/A
Member Support	N/A		N/A
Indirect (Admin)	N/A		N/A
CNCS Award amount	\$ 674,820	Total Local Share (cash + in-kind)	N/A
% sharing proposed	N/A		N/A
% share required	N/A		N/A
Cost-per-member proposed	\$16,300 (\$16,300 max allowed)		

Total AmeriCorps Member Service Years: 41.4	Slot Types Requested						
	1700	1200	900	675	450	300	Total
Slots With living allowance	10		22	48	8		88*
Slots with only ed award							

*Smaller than current year – 49.16 MSY and 105 slots

Program Description (executive summary):

The Maine Conservation Corps proposes to have 88 AmeriCorps members who will accrue marketable skills and experiences, while completing vital environmental stewardship activities, including but not limited to: trail rehabilitation and construction, aquatic and terrestrial habitat restoration and monitoring, and environmental education programming in all of Maine's 16 counties. At the end of the first program year, the AmeriCorps members will be responsible for treating or constructing 200 miles of trail. In addition, the AmeriCorps members will leverage 600 community volunteers who will be engaged in skill development activities to perpetuate the stewardship efforts of members. This program will concentrate on the CNCS focus area of Environmental Stewardship. The CNCS investment of \$674,820 will leverage \$1,056,397, \$668,567 in public funding and \$387,830 in private funding.

Service locations:

Not identified

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

Department of Education WorkReady Accreditation, 21st Century Conservation Service Corps, The Corps Network, Office for Outdoor Recreation

Will the applicant place AmeriCorps members with other agencies? Yes (Environmental Stewards) 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: EN5: Miles of trails or rivers treated

Proposed target: 200

OUTCOME: EN5.1: Miles of trails or rivers improved

Proposed target: 180

MEMBER DEVELOPMENT

(measures listed in the RFP not entered and targets were not proposed because CNCS does not allow them)

To be entered in state award if selected nationally for funding.

CAPACITY BUILDING

(measures listed in the RFP not entered and targets were not proposed because CNCS does not allow them)

To be entered in state award if selected nationally for funding.

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	Adequate	18
Evidence tier – category points	Preliminary	6
Evidence quality	Strong	8
Notice Priority	Strong	1
Member Experience	Adequate	3.75
Organizational Capability		
Organizational Background & Staffing	Adequate	6.75
Compliance/Accountability	Strong	5
Culture that Values Learning	Strong	5
Member Supervision	Strong	6
Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy	Adequate	18.75
Evaluation Plan	Adequate (no score involved)	
Total Peer Reviewer Score		78.25

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 Model		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment of community need targeted and funding priorities 	Strong	3.75
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extent to which proposal will serve specified communities and add to diversity of Commission's portfolio 	Strong	3.75
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal is innovative use of AmeriCorps and might be replicated 	Weak	1.88
<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 	Strong	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 	Strong	3.75
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RECOMPETE ONLY: implemented program effectively 	Strong	3.75
Financial Plan	Adequate	7.5
Fiscal Systems		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity of Financial mgt system to comply with fed requirements 	Strong	3.33
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strength of orgz financial mgt practices as evidenced by audits, etc. 	Strong	3.33
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strength of sponsor orgs financial status/stability per audit, 990, etc. 	Strong	3.34
Total Task Force Score		43.75
Peer Review Score		78.25
Final Score for Applicant (150 possible)		122

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.

- Environmental Stewards are not adequately addressed in member specific discussions or performance measures.
- Logic model exceeded page limit.
- Source of Funds description was not sufficient to give confidence the resources will be secured.

Peer Reviewer Notes and Appraisal Summary:

Program Design. *This section covers the community need, service to be performed in response to need, evidence the service will be effective, roles for AmeriCorps and partners, performance measures, and anticipated results for year one.*

Theory of change and logic model

- Local data, reinforcing the impact of the model via external evaluation (disrupted by COVID).
- The theory of change was well researched and the project inputs and activities are clearly described and well aligned with best practice. Outputs and short term outcomes are well defined and achievable within the timeline presented, though references to specific AmeriCorps Performance measures for environmental stewards are not included. The proposers have relied on data from quasi-experimental project design as well as partner surveys to support their project design to date. Evaluations have been conducted by expert evaluators. The partner surveys in particular, are subject to bias. Future plans for data collection are more quantitative and robust.
- It shows that it will likely succeed if run the way it is described. Like the soft skills, like teamwork, communication, problem solving, that come out of the actual work.

Evidence Tier

- The applicant has submitted up to two outcome evaluation reports that evaluated the same intervention described in the application and yielded positive results on one or more key desired outcomes of interest as depicted in the applicant's logic model.
- Two program evaluations are provided in support of the outcomes of corps interventions in the Environmental stewardship realm, specifically on the quality of recreational trail systems. To plan they consulted the NC University evaluators, and others in the field. They also engaged a pair of environmental stewards to gather data. Covid did affect some data.

Evidence Quality

The reports' methodology in the submitted reports is quasi-experimental and data is collected relies on surveys of clients who may or may not have knowledge/understanding of best practice in sustainable trail construction and so may be biased. The reports are very recent and the conclusion shows that the applicants interventions provided significant improvements in the quality of the trails studied.

Notice Priority

- The proposal very directly addresses the Environmental Stewardship funding priority, is focused in rural areas, and meets the requirements of an AmeriCorps program.
- Environmental Steward. This is a recompetete grant

Member Experience

- Significant experience preparing for Life After AmeriCorps, with interventions for education, career readiness, and leadership
- The proposed program provides significant training to the AmeriCorps members in both technical and soft-skills. Particular attention is also paid to work-readiness skills. Diversity training is provided to both staff and members. 60% of members are recruited from outside the state and are mostly in the 18-24 year old range. 40 % indicate a desire to remain in state after service. Maine has a declining population. The

shrinking workforce has potentially serious consequences for Maines economy. The infusion of young workers into the state is an important benefit.

- Members will gain skills that range from operating a chainsaw, and hand tools. They will get certificates in Chainsaw safety, MHFA, National Incident Management System, First Aid, They will gain leadership skills, and have to communicate and work in teams. Teams will have them appreciate different backgrounds. All employable skills. This did not discuss geographic or demographics

Organizational Capability.

Organizational Background and Staffing

- Team Leaders + Site Supervisors, admins with experience in the field as members
- The organization is well established and supported and has a well-developed network of partners. The roles and responsibilities of both staff and AmeriCorps members are well defined and the qualifications for each position are well described. The names of key staff members and the length of their tenure at the organization are provided. The organization has a culture of building capacity among staff and members and promoting from within.
- Comprehensive org chart included. Detail about who will oversee the field team participants.
- More info provided about field teams than stewards

Compliance and Accountability

- Past experience and internal/external audits
- A recent audit by the OIG reported not findings suggesting that the organization was fully compliant and with well-functioning tracking and oversight systems. The proposal also describes these systems and all bases appear to be covered.
- The grant spells out the oversight as far as leadership from the participants and the staff. There are meetings, check ins and responsibility to self and others.

Culture that values learning

- Consistent surveying of members and partner assessments, with updates to training materials and policies
- The two Evaluation Reports provided, the improvement in the design from one report to the 2nd and the planned improvements in data collection and analysis suggest that the organization does have a culture that values learning.
- MCC strives for continual improvement by collecting and assessing feedback and data through a variety of means from participants, partners, and stakeholders. The MCC Advisory Committee consists of public and private entities, partners, and alumni. The committee provides a forum to discuss the future of MCC, establish a strategic plan, and advance the long-term sustainability of the organization. Input is also solicited from partners to assess their needs, current capabilities, and future areas of programmatic expansion. Members and current staff offer some of the most comprehensive and insightful notes. Members are surveyed throughout their terms for input on trainings and after their terms for perspectives on everything from the process of applying to MCC, to orientation, volunteer collaboration, lessons learned, and areas for program improvement. All partners are surveyed to gauge the effectiveness and quality of service. MCC assesses information to establish trends, successes and gaps

Member Supervision

- Significant Team Leader training, with 1:2 ratio of member to MCC support
- The organization has an extensive training program for their staff and field team leaders and provides training and orientation for host site supervisors. The frequency of site visits and direct contact with host site supervisors is not mentioned. The 2019 evaluation plan reports that the large majority of host site supervisors are satisfied with the member supervision and performance of the teams overall.
- The proposed program model entails a nearly 1:2 staff to member ratio (including staff directly administering the AmeriCorps Program, Team Leaders, and Host Site Supervisors), creating a robust structure of guidance and support. Environmental Stewards will have regular interactions and direction from

their Host Site Supervisors. Team Leaders will oversee members of Field Teams. Field Coordinators and the Training Coordinator provide an additional layer of support and expertise on projects and at host sites. And all members and site supervisors will be provided guidance and support throughout the season from Program Managers and the Director. Team Leaders will undergo 12 weeks of training (8 weeks for returning leaders) geared toward team dynamics, accountability, reporting, data collection, leadership, communication, and technical skills related to effective service delivery

- Emphasized field teams

Budget Adequacy and Cost Effectiveness. (CNCS no longer allows narrative for this section. They directed reviewers to consider the budget narrative and its formulas, accuracy, expense items.)

Section: Cost and Budget Adequacy (25 %)

- This is a Fixed Amount Grant. The \$674,820 requested for 41.40 MSYs is accurately calculated, and represents the maximum allowable. The grant will also leverage \$1,056,397 and \$668,567 in public funding and \$387,830 in private funding. Match resources to support the project are listed and broadly identified as public and/or private funding.
- Source of Funds detail is minimal and not sufficient to confidently show resources are available to operate program.

Evaluation Plan Feedback

- Ambitious Evaluation plan aims to demonstrate that appropriate trail construction and rehabilitation methods result in improved environmental conditions along the subject trail. Challenging to accomplish without a comparison group, which would strengthen the overall design. Complete external evaluation disrupted, but additional performance measures surrounding volunteer and member outcomes should also be gathered.
- The project will engage an expert, outside evaluator (as required by the amount of the grant request) to help finalize the new Evaluation plan which will be of a quasi-experimental design and which will provide a more rigorous data collection methods and more a more quantitative analysis of the data. A data collection system exists that will facilitate the data collection process. Past evaluations suggest that the proposed interventions will produce the proposed results. The desired outcomes and research questions are clearly connected and well described. Evaluation components are broadly described and will be fleshed out more with the assistance of an expert, outside evaluator. Criteria for the selection of the evaluator are presented and are reasonable. The evaluation plan addresses improvements to the environment but does not address or measure any changes in partner attitudes toward more environmentally sustainable trail building technologies.
- Chose a longitudinal design because it measures the characteristics of the same individuals over time. A longitudinal design is superior at establishing the sequence of change and the measurement of individual changes over time reduces the effect of differences among individuals (improvement is based on an individual's starting point). It also affords the opportunity to explore intervention dosage and durability

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 (3) No (0)

Comments:

- Continuation of the grant is supported by the proposal, and anecdotal responses of the evaluations.
- The applicant has a track record of success managing and delivering this type of program. Improvements to the Evaluation Plan suggest the next iteration of the program will be even better.
- Evidence based, it will train participants to gain usable job skills. It will give Maine needed resources to have trails and recreational draw.

What elements of the proposal are unclear?

- Covid impacted 2020, how will the proposal adjust moving forward.

- How often the program staff interacts with the Host Site Supervisors and how. How often and how they interact with the Environmental Stewards?
- The effectiveness and many other aspects of the Environmental Stewards. They are barely discussed throughout the proposal yet they serve the greatest number of hours individually.
- This was clearly written and easy to follow

What else do you have to say about this proposal?

- The Performance Indicator section appears to have been cut off. Either that or it is incomplete.
- The logic model exceeded 3-page limit so final page was not reviewed/considered.

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.*

- The applicant's goals are strongly aligned with the funding priorities. They provide a highly detailed approach to their rationale, process, and evaluation. It is evident they have tremendous experience.
- Strong alignment with environmental stewardship.
- The program clearly addresses the priority of environmental stewardship through its focus on trail improvement and stewardship activities. Much, but not all, of the work will likely be done in more rural areas of the state that are economically challenged and where outdoor recreation is supportive of economic development efforts.
- As a long-standing fairly traditional program, it is difficult to characterize it as an innovative use of national service. There are elements of the proposed evaluation plan that are fairly new and may result in a better understanding of program impacts.
- As noted, this is a long-standing program of the state of Maine that will likely continue into the future. More emphasis could be placed on the stewardship effort and how it could be sustained/supported in the future through the development of volunteers or improved sustainability for the host organizations.
- Hard to talk about MCC as innovative because it has been doing the same thing for over 20 years. No new ideas or taking advantage of new interest in community resiliency, climate change, and other related issues. They are overlooking opportunity to expand or modify.
- They don't talk about Environmental Stewards beyond initial mention. Glaring oversight in proposal given the number of people. Need to upgrade this portion of proposal – what they do, impact, performance measures. Omission is a significant weakness.
- Sustain the program is interesting because, if it was sustainable, would it be year 30? That said, as federal program, it operates well.

Assessment of Past Performance

- Past performance appears to be adequate to justify continued funding. They have indicated good processes for supervision, member recruitment and evaluation.
- The program has traditionally filled its member slots with high member retainage success rates, although it fell short this year due to COVID restrictions. It is unclear whether this will continue to impact the program in the coming year, although time has likely given the operation time to evaluate and implement changes and adjustments. Acknowledging the COVID issue and its impact, the program has traditionally shown strong performance.

- The report of performance on another grant is problematic. They self-referenced and picked an internal fund that was reallocated to support their staff training. It was internal funding and they did not include any outcome data.
- Noted is the fact the OIG had no findings. That said, they did have member background issues in the past few years.

Assessment of Financial Plan

- All of the required items appear to be complete, accurate, and in line with CNCS requirements.
- The proposal does indicate significant in-kind/local support for the program.
- Source of funds detail is insufficient, especially in light of predicted financial/economic climate. Over a million dollars in public funds are listed but not described regarding sources.

Fiscal Systems

- MCC uses the State of Maine's fiscal apparatus and has demonstrated strong fiscal systems.
- Most telling, the program recently was the subject of an OIG review, which it passed with no findings. There have historically been minimal to no administrative and financial issues with the program.

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

What else do you have to say about this proposal?

- This application is thorough, shows demonstrated success, and is carefully put together. MCC seems to have strong member management and financial systems and their proposed scope of work aligns very well with the focus areas identified by CNCS.
- Solid, traditional program with a long history of good performance. It appears to provide its members with a positive experience, including attracting young members from outside of Maine who express and interest in remaining after their service. It's worth noting that the program is undertaking efforts to improve/quantify its impact through systematic evaluation of its trail work.
- My one concern is that the proposal spends virtually no time talking about its stewardship element and the potential for that program to assist in developing either sustainability or volunteer management improvements in the organizations within which members are placed. While I appreciate and recognize the trail focus of the program, stewardship is a vital element of it which appears under acknowledged/appreciated. I also wonder if the program could benefit by adopting a potentially wider focus, pulling in elements of community sustainability and/or work in support of the state's efforts to address climate change. This might be worth exploring with the program or with the Governor's Office.