

No Greater Mission. No Greater Means.

Deploying National Service
to Build Civic Bridges

A Working Paper By
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CONVERGENCE



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Executive Summary

As toxic polarization continues to erode Americans' ability to live peaceably together and solve our common challenges, indicators of community well-being continue to decline. We don't trust institutions or each other; trustworthy local news and information are harder and harder to find in broad swaths of the country; neighborhoods and families are fracturing along partisan lines; violence has accelerated to a pace that feels relentless and normalized; and anxiety, alienation, and loneliness are driving a deep national mental health crisis.

Signs of hope are beginning to emerge, however. A burgeoning field of bridgebuilding organizations is strengthening the effectiveness and capacity of efforts that bring people and groups together across their divides to build trust and understanding. Consistent with decades of research into contact theory, these programs leverage human nature: when we connect under the right conditions with others, even with people we disdain and distrust, we are able to see each other's humanity, find common ground, and build trust and understanding. Efforts like these programs, though, won't achieve scale until they meet Americans where they live, work, study, worship, play, and serve.

This is where national service¹ has begun to play a role.

As former leaders of AmeriCorps and its parent agency,² we are encouraged by recent and growing efforts by leaders across the national service ecosystem to deploy Corps members in building civic bridges across divides. New pilots and innovations are making quick strides in a small number of states and communities. Over the past year, we've heard multiple versions of the same question from these innovators, as well as from many others: what specific actions might the AmeriCorps agency, states, programs, Corps members, policymakers, private funders, and researchers take to advance success in building connections across conflict?

In this working paper, we map out how national service can focus its unique assets and energies on helping communities bridge divides, especially divides driven by conflicting ideological, cultural, or political perspectives. Through a discovery process that included 70 interviews, we have concluded that helping meet our communities' civic bridgebuilding needs represents an imperative for national service as well as for the bridgebuilding field. Not an opportunity. Not a promising but optional pathway. An imperative.

¹ In this paper, the term "national service" largely refers to AmeriCorps. We recognize there are many other programs that offer national service style experiences (focused and sustained service over time) that do not participate in the AmeriCorps grant program. That category includes some faith-oriented programs, some programs that are attached to educational organizations, and some state-funded programs. That said, AmeriCorps remains the largest player in this space, and has the potential to set the pace for service even beyond its funding. When also try to be specific when we refer to actions that the federal agency – the Corporation for National & Community Service – can take.

² As former leaders, we know AmeriCorps members often make connections across difference – this is one of the strengths and values of the program and the experience. Seeing how naturally these connections are formed is what inspired us to pen this paper.

It will not be easy for AmeriCorps to update and retool to meet the challenges at this delicate and crucial moment for our democracy. The service and sacrifice of current Corps members and more than one million alums have been among our country's most underappreciated assets. And still, AmeriCorps has yet to fully realize its potential to strengthen our communities' civic infrastructure and meet our most pressing challenges. We believe that embracing bridgebuilding – connecting across difference – as core to AmeriCorps's mission can help resolve some difficult “stuck points” for national service, including serious challenges with recruitment and retention. Employers from corporations to the military to nonprofits know that the mindsets and skills to connect across conflict and to collaborate with diverse groups are among the characteristics most linked to success, especially in these divided times.

This paper offers five high-level recommendations to help AmeriCorps continue its pivot toward this powerful new mission to lessen divisiveness in communities across the country:

- 1. Help all Corps members earn certification in “civic CPR” — that is, equip them with the mindsets and skills they need to become effective bridgebuilders during their service and beyond.**
- 2. Increase diversity, especially viewpoint diversity, across the national service ecosystem.**
- 3. Build strong, two-way bridges between the national service community and the many nonprofit civic-bridgebuilding organizations operating at the local and national levels.**
- 4. Mobilize hundreds of thousands of AmeriCorps alumni to become valuable civic assets in their communities, just like military veterans and Returned Peace Corps Volunteers are today.**
- 5. Accelerate research and continued philanthropic investment in bridgebuilding through national service to ensure maximum returns on investment.**

We elaborate on each of these recommendations in the following pages. We also propose menus of specific activities that could move these recommendations toward fruition, tailored to the key players in the national service and bridgebuilding ecosystems.

Now is the moment to help the national service and bridgebuilding communities work together in equipping our communities to connect and collaborate across our polarized differences. Through this initiative, No Greater Mission, we aim to call attention to the good work already underway as well as catalyze additional conversations, connections, innovations, and action that will be useful to help AmeriCorps prioritize bridgebuilding as a central objective, activity, and outcome of national service.

No Greater Mission. No Greater Means

Deploying National Service to Build Civic Bridges

Review of Opportunities and Challenges

From Agreement to Opportunity to Imperative

We come from different sides of the aisle. David is a Republican; John a Democrat. Friends for over 25 years, we have each served in senior positions for Members of Congress and served Presidents of our parties at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). Not surprisingly, we have big disagreements about politics and policies. But we also have multiple areas of passionate agreement, including two that animate this working paper.

First, we believe that helping Americans connect across divisions couldn't be more urgent as we struggle with toxic polarization. Far beyond normal political disagreements, polarization has brought America new and rising levels of disdain, distrust, dysfunction, and violence. All of that makes it harder and harder for us to solve big problems, erodes confidence in our political system, severs attachment to our country, and worsens our mental health crisis.

Here are just a few of many frightening statistics that reinforce our conclusion:

42%

The New York Times found that approximately 42 percent of both Republicans and Democrats view members of the opposing party as “evil,” and 20 percent from each party say the opposition “lack the traits to be considered fully human.”

64%

Last year an NPR/Ipsos survey revealed that 64 percent of Americans have lost faith in American democracy, and 70 percent believe the country is at risk of failing.

“Backsliding Democracy”

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance has now included the U.S. on its list of “backsliding democracies,” which explains why many international peace-building organizations are launching U.S. programs for the first time.

Second, we believe AmeriCorps can help make a meaningful contribution to tackling toxic polarization and strengthening community cohesion if it retools to embrace this new purpose with urgency. At its 30th anniversary, AmeriCorps has much to celebrate in terms of work accomplished, challenges met, lives improved, America's service ethos advanced, and

well over one million alums having served. It's a remarkable record for one of America's most remarkable civic experiments.

Yet, to us, even these impressive accomplishments don't live up to the full potential of national service to strengthen and invigorate our communities and nation. National service was created to take on the country's biggest challenges, and right now that means tackling toxic polarization head on.

Domestic and international experts in bridging civic divides emphasize that Americans can't meaningfully confront polarization until we connect across difference where we work, study, worship, play, and serve. National service — especially the mission, reach, and infrastructure of AmeriCorps — offers the most immediately deployable and most economical capacity to accomplish that. At the same time, realigning to support bridgebuilding opens the door for national service to deliver the scope of benefit to the country that the program was built to deliver. Deploying Corps members to help turn back the tides of divisiveness and distrust in our communities may be difficult, but it is the right pathway for AmeriCorps to live up to its promise and to “show up and be counted” in the fight to make our civil society pluralistic and healthy.

No surprise, then, that we've arrived at this conclusion: Fully engaging our national service capacity to meet our communities' civic bridgebuilding needs represents an imperative for the country and national service. Not an opportunity. Not a promising but optional pathway. An imperative. Now is the time to bring all of AmeriCorps's reach, infrastructure, and promise to bear on reducing harmful divisiveness in our communities, building civic pathways for healing, and helping ignite a sense of common purpose.

“ Americans are longing for connection. The loneliness, pain, and isolation are huge and growing. National service is a great way to address this alienation epidemic and the toxicity that flows from it.

- Jennifer Hoos Rothberg, Einhorn Collaborative

To produce this Working Paper, we interviewed 70 leaders and practitioners in national service, military service, civic bridgebuilding, democracy, peacebuilding, psychology, and brain science. We spoke with experts with impressive degrees; practitioners with a lifetime of frontline experience; and leaders and youth (not always different) who are not currently part of national service but hope to engage. For a list of interviewees, please see page 34, Appendix 2: Interviewees on page 34.

From all these conversations, we emerged with some key takeaways:

- Appreciation for the various ways that bridging across difference is embedded organically within the Corps member experience, even if that work is less intentional and purposeful than required to maximize the benefit to communities wrestling with toxic polarization;
- Excitement about a number of new and innovative programs, pilots and capacity building that are framing a civic bridgebuilding purpose across multiple elements of the national service ecosystem: the federal agency, state commissions, grantees, private funders, researchers, and groups of Corps members and alums.
- Appreciation for significantly increased attention by supporters and funders of both national service and bridgebuilding to the role national service can play in tackling polarization; funder-driven groups and initiatives like New Pluralists, More Perfect, Our Common Purpose, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE), and others signal the growth of this interest.
- The conviction that national service has, within reach, the ability to contribute meaningfully to the difficult work our communities must undertake to help Americans connect across our differences and reduce tensions, polarization and trends of violence.
- Clarity about important next steps the national service and civic bridgebuilding fields can take to build on present innovation and prepare and support Corps members in helping combat toxic polarization in communities across the country.

Over and over again, we heard that national service and bridgebuilding in our communities go together like peanut butter and chocolate. And, over and over, we heard about the benefits not only to America, but to the national service and bridgebuilding fields themselves of deploying Corps members to build civic bridges. We also spent a good deal of time asking questions about the nuanced but important shifts that leaders in both communities believe they must make in order to maximize the results of those deployments.

The recommendations to the national service community and bridgebuilding field that form the core of this working paper are drawn from and informed by these conversations along with our own national service and bridgebuilding experience. We believe these recommendations will support elevating and scaling the contribution national service is just beginning to make to civic bridgebuilding and collaboration in communities. And we hope that actors across the bridging and service ecosystems will see a good number of these recommendations as sufficiently specific and actionable that they will choose to adopt or adapt them to grow AmeriCorps' contribution to building civic bridges beyond its current promising but nascent state.

We are excited to offer these recommendations, and at the same time recognize that they are part of a larger conversation among policymakers, leaders in the service and bridgebuilding movements at the national, state, and local levels, researchers, and members of communities

across the country who are seeking ways to reduce tensions and create the conditions for collective problem-solving.

The Roots of Polarization

America's growing polarization is a result of our human responses to two incitements. First, many are experiencing fear, uncertainty, and powerlessness in the face of rapid and tectonic shifts in technology, our economy, our demographic makeup, our cultural mores, and more. Second, "conflict entrepreneurs" from the worlds of politics and the media exploit our fear and sense of powerlessness – and funnel billions of dollars into products, communications and campaigns that exacerbate our divides, distrust and anger for eyeballs, clicks and votes.

Fears that our families and our sacred values are under threat, that our needs are going unheard, and that those with power don't care about us trigger our bodies and brains to seek the comfort and protection of insular groups and social and information bubbles. This behavior is predictable and well-documented in psychology, brain science, and international peace- and democracy-building. Charged by feelings of threat and fear — and goaded by feeling disrespected by other groups that are also acting out their fears — we shout-down and demonize people in those other groups. Polarization normalizes the attitudes and behaviors that emerge from the resulting loop of mutual enmity and disparagement.

In this context, it can be particularly risky for the person who violates their group's norm by reaching out with curiosity, generosity, or respect to someone in an "opposing" group. We often reserve our most hurtful and polarized attacks for the members of our own groups who try to moderate the conflicts with others. And fear of attack by our own can be even more destabilizing than fear of being attacked by outsiders.

Whether we come from the left or the right, when we retreat to our self-protective information and social bubbles, we often stop seeing the complexities and nuances in issues we care about. We engage in binary thinking. Everything becomes black and white and has sharp edges. It's simply us and them, all right or all wrong.

Research highlights the ways in which our brains fall prey to multiple highly consequential distortions:

- **We dramatically overestimate differences.** We incorrectly assume that those from other groups hold views far more antithetical to our own than they actually are. Multiple studies confirm that our positions are much closer than we very firmly believe.
- **We misattribute motives.** We become certain that our group acts out of positive motives like love, while those with opposing positions act out of hate, vengeance, or malice.
- **We moralize.** We believe intensely that our opponents are acting immorally — even illegally — and are destroying sacred values.

- **We feel disdain.** We experience the visceral feeling that our opponents are unfathomably, disgustingly alien, and “less than,” which undermines our capacity for humility, generosity, and curiosity.
- **We disbelieve and/or disregard facts that contradict our polarized beliefs.** Although people on all sides of our divides believe that the other side would understand their error “if only” someone would present them with this or that fact, the research demonstrates how confirmation bias makes virtually all of us immune to facts supporting the position of those we disdain.

Together these distortions make empathy and trust nearly impossible. The insidious distortions of polarization obscure the fundamental reality that we are all striving to achieve the basic elements of living with dignity: physical safety and economic security; a sense of belonging and purpose; success and fulfillment for ourselves and our children; fair treatment; and so on.

The scientific evidence makes clear that none of us can easily see or feel these distortions in our own thinking unless we slow down and are intentional. Like the pressure of our atmosphere or the weight of gravity, polarization acts on each of us invisibly and consequentially. Ironically, the more education we have, the more certain we are of these distortions and the more difficult it is to convince us to reexamine our perceptions. We mention this here because it’s important for us and others to keep in mind the truth that those of us *fighting against polarization* are just as likely as anyone else to fall prey to its distortions.



"I will increase [the number of AmeriCorps slots] to 250,000, and make that increased service a vehicle to meet national goals like providing health care and education, saving our planet, and restoring our standing in the world, so that citizens see their efforts connected to a common purpose. People of all ages, stations, and skills will be asked to serve. Because when it comes to the challenges we face, the American people are not the problem - they are the answer.

- President Barack Obama

Bridgebuilding Offers a Solution

Fortunately, the evidence also points to a doorway for us to escape our bubbles and distortions. Seventy years of research demonstrates that we can reduce prejudices, distortions, and provocative behavior simply by being, as the researchers say, “in proximity,” in safe settings

where we get to know and understand each other as individuals. We can find common ground even if none of us change any belief or position.

This research, in combination with the rise in polarization, has spurred the rapid growth of a new field devoted to bringing Americans together across our differences. Thousands of bridgebuilding organizations and initiatives are today working to lower the heat and strengthen cohesion and resilience in our communities and society wide.

Herein lies one important opening for national service to make a distinctive contribution to reducing tensions among and between Americans through partnering with the emerging field of organizations building civic bridges and collaborative problem-solving across the country.

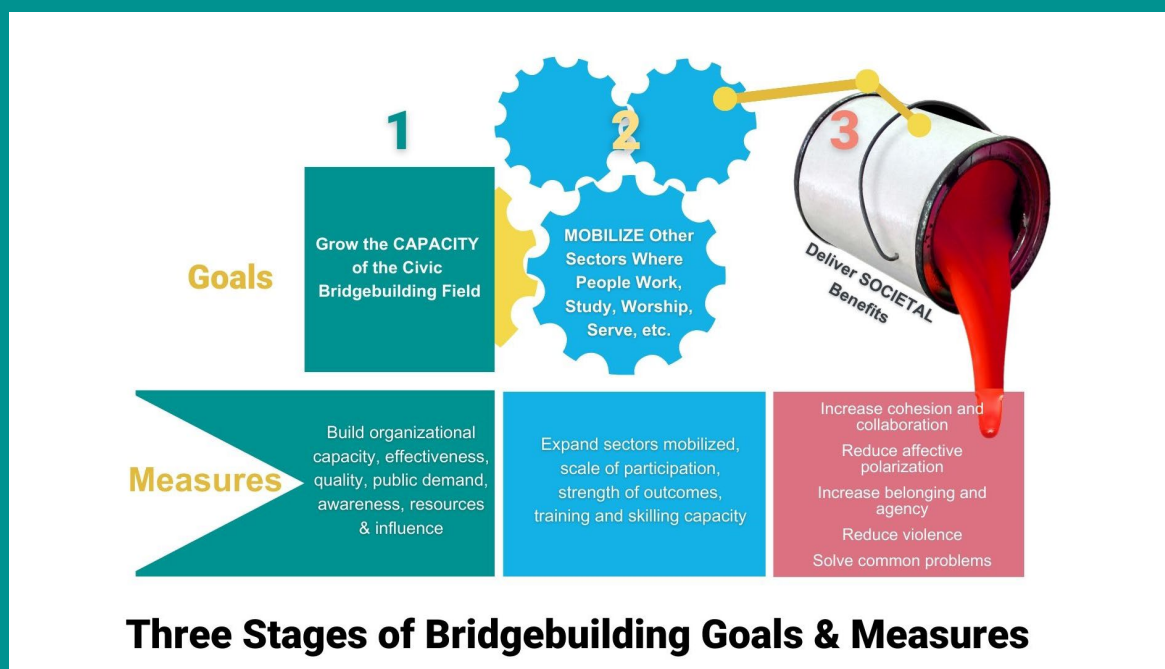
The concept of bridgebuilding is expansive, and different leaders and groups define it differently. For the purposes of this working paper, we're embracing the definition of bridgebuilding shared by the Bridging Movement Alignment Council (BMAC), a group of nearly 100 bridging leaders who came together as a coalition in 2020:

“We bring Americans together across divides to listen and understand each other, to find common ground, and to normalize bridgebuilding behavior in society.”

BMAC'S GOALS TO BRING AMERICANS TOGETHER

The Bridging Movement Alignment Council (BMAC) has effectively codified the goals, measures, and many best practices in the work of building civic bridges – especially, but not only across strong viewpoints of difference. BMAC sees bridgebuilding work as having three tiers of goals:

1. **Growing the bridgebuilding field's capacity**
2. **Mobilizing others to build bridges where they live, work, play, worship, study, serve, etc.**
3. **Catalyzing societal change**



Moving the Work Forward

This work can move forward through many different models:

- Bringing groups or individuals together across their divides at the community level to increase understanding and strengthen social cohesion
- Bringing grassroots groups and leaders together to build trust across multiple divides to forge consensus on gridlocked issues (e.g., Convergence Collaboratives)
- Addressing specific areas of controversial community actions and decisions (e.g., confederate statues and names; community/police areas of conflict; parents' role in local schools; etc.)
- Fostering “unlikely allies” to support a cause they have in common (although they are visible opponents in other spaces)
- Increasing trust and common cause among targeted populations and crossing specific divides (E.g., political/partisan, ideological, generational, geographic, cross- and interfaith)
- Creating venues and campaigns to stimulate public discussion about and demand for more bridgebuilding and collaboration opportunities
- Running systems that support programs, like training, fundraising (for others), research, convening communities of practice and learning, etc.

Shared Understanding of Bridgebuilding

Most of these programs and models share critical understandings about effective bridgebuilding:

- Although people are hardwired to retreat to their corners in the face of fear and uncertainty, we are also hardwired to crave connections. Bridgebuilders create the opportunities to fulfill that craving.
- High levels of success for bridgebuilding experiences across lines of difference require all participants to be equipped and ready to:
 - Listen (use both of what the experts call “active” and “responsive” listening)
 - Be self-aware (willing to see and confront one’s emotions and biases)
 - Self-regulate emotional reactions (especially to real or perceived slights by the other, but also attaching emotion to discussion of facts and ideas)
- Bridgebuilding does not work when:
 - The venue is not demonstrably safe for all participants
 - The needs or preferences of select participants take precedence over the needs of other participants.
 - Power imbalances play out between participants.

- Bridgebuilding is not the same as increasing civility, as critics will sometimes misstate. Bridgebuilding is about relational transformation – increasing trust, understanding, and sense of shared humanity – not about being “nice” or adjusting personally held positions. Civility, on the other hand, is performative and unconnected to relational change, and it can sometimes call for compromising or deemphasizing one’s values or legitimate sense of urgency or concern.
- Because bridgebuilding can bring many different types of people and groups together across different kinds of differences, the challenges, program requirements, and success measures can change fundamentally based on the kind of differences being bridged. We find it useful to imagine a continuum along which the difficulty of bridging increases as the level of division and disdain between people increases.
 - On one end of the continuum is bridgebuilding work across different experiences and backgrounds of people who see themselves as allies and are eager to connect more meaningfully and build greater understanding of each other; no one worries that others’ positions or beliefs pose a meaningful threat to them.
 - Although important and complex, this form of bridgebuilding, in which differences haven’t polarized, is appropriate for almost any organization and community.
 - Without appropriate attention, this kind of bridgebuilding can even increase polarization. Connections and relationships between people of similar viewpoints can reinforce, invigorate, and lend validity to a shared sense of disdain for groups that disagree with them.
 - When done right, however, the skills cultivated to achieve increased connections and understanding – even when there is little viewpoint diversity – can nevertheless be transferable and supportive of work on the other end of the continuum.
 - Toward the other end of the continuum, bridgebuilding works across increasingly polarized differences in viewpoint, in which parties see some level of threat to their own welfare from the positions, beliefs, and values of others, and polarization limits their ability to understand each other, or even to appreciate each other’s humanity.
 - This higher-yield bridgebuilding is central to resolving the very strong political polarization we’re currently experiencing.
 - Issues around preconditions, venue safety, expectation of respect, power imbalances, fears that one’s needs won’t be considered become increasingly consequential to the success of bridgebuilding programming as it moves toward this end of the continuum.
 - Although there are a small number of bridgebuilding organizations that reach all the way to the terminus of the continuum, engaging groups that are the most extreme, hate-based, and-or anti-democratic (E.g., KKK, neo-Nazis, Antifa, etc.), we believe that all civic bridging work undertaken by Corps members should stop short of this endpoint.

Many in the bridgebuilding field see the national service community as a powerful natural ally in building civic bridges. That's because of the prevalence of AmeriCorps members in communities across the country, the role Corps members already play in strengthening civic infrastructure, and an affinity for the idealism and sacrifice represented by committing to a year of service. In addition, there's recognition among bridgers that effective civic bridgebuilding across divides can improve mission-level outcomes of service work: service with rather than for communities; stronger community cohesion and resilience; increased collaborative problem-solving; greater trust in institutions and each other; and growth and improvement of each community's civic and service infrastructure.

Indeed this allyship is playing out well in virtually all of the national service pilots and experiments in community bridgebuilding, each built on strong partnerships between national service and bridging organizations.

Yet, despite this early innovation and the natural synergies and opportunities across the bridgebuilding and national service communities, most of the leaders in these arenas don't yet know each other well or speak the same language. We hope this Working Paper will help stimulate more direct engagement between and among the bridgebuilding and national service communities.

We see enormous opportunity for this burgeoning field of bridgebuilders to create unique and consequential pathways to partner, work, and learn together with organizations and networks across the national service ecosystem, including state commissions, program practitioners, Corps members, alums, private funders, and CNCS. As national service increases its commitment to strengthening civic cohesion across our divides, the emerging field of bridgebuilding should offer tools, resources, and best practices that would enable programs to more quickly stand-up interventions that build trust and lower the temperature more effectively, without reinventing the wheel.

MEASURING BRIDGEBUILDING OUTCOMES: THE SOCIAL COHESION IMPACT MEASURE (SCIM)

BMAC, with support from Civic Health Project and New Pluralists, released the Social Cohesion Impact Measure (SCIM), a before-and-after survey instrument that any organization implementing a bridging program can use and adapt. Dozens of organizations are currently using it. Using validated questions, the tool scientifically measures the impact of bridgebuilding programs in loosening polarization's hold on individuals, including programs' impact on, among other things:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| → Affective Polarization | → Pluralistic Norms | → Respect / Understanding |
| → Intellectual Humility | → Humanization | → Perceived Threat |
| → Intergroup Empathy | → Moral Outrage | → Anger |
| | → Value Listening | → Identity |

In addition, we'd hope to see hundreds of bridgebuilding organizations leveraging opportunities to utilize national service programming as a vehicle for bringing people together for bridgebuilding purposes. That can happen both by bridgebuilding organizations using service locations as venues for bridgebuilding and by bridgebuilding organizations inviting service organizations to program service activities within their bridgebuilding programs.

CAN WE PURSUE JUSTICE AND BUILD CIVIC BRIDGES – AT THE SAME TIME?

Do we need to make a binary choice between pursuing justice, especially racial equity, and building civic bridges? In the justice community, there are those who see bridgebuilding across political or ideological lines either as a naïve distraction from a more important agenda or, worse, as an invitation to defenders of the status quo to slow down progress. On the other hand, some in the bridgebuilding community believe America can't make effective and sustainable strides to undo injustice – or succeed with any important problem-solving – until we first succeed in building greater social cohesion.

We note that distrust between those fighting toxic polarization and those focusing on fighting injustice has perpetuated and, ironically, polarized what should serve as a productive tension.

- Yes, it's true that in the past, the argument, "We need to bring all Americans along on this change," has been used to protect the status quo from that change.
- It's also true that many ideas that might have addressed areas of justice have languished for failure to build bridges to the "other side of the aisle."

Nevertheless, we are skeptical of binary viewpoints and believe a binary framework is particularly counterproductive at this moment, facing our current crop of challenges. It will not work for America to slow or pause in either improving and saving lives by pursuing justice or in backing America away from the brink of catastrophic conflict.

For AmeriCorps, these tensions will add complexity as the agency, states, grantee networks, funders and bridgebuilder organizations discuss and act around: training corps members to reach across differences; increasing viewpoint diversity among grantees and corps members; incorporating civic bridgebuilding into competitive grantmaking; prioritizing research and evaluation required to increase the effectiveness and scalability of AmeriCorps' bridgebuilding.

“ We’ve found, even if you have extreme ideological views, you can still have the temperament and mindset to be a bridgebuilder.

- Manu Meel, BridgeUSA

Bridgebuilding through National Service: Reasons for Optimism

We hope that by now you can begin to see why we are so optimistic about national service's distinctive and valuable capacity to help reverse the insidious growth of toxic polarization. This optimism is driven by two key factors: our shared beliefs that bridgebuilding fits into national service's mission, and that success in connecting our communities across divides is within reach.



Photo credit: Interfaith America

AmeriCorps CEO Michael Smith (center) has made bridging divides a high priority for AmeriCorps in the current Administration. Here Smith joins representatives from Team Up, a partnership among Interfaith America (initiative leader), Habitat for Humanity, YMCA, and Catholic Charities to pilot bridgebuilding training and programming as part of their service delivery.

Here's why we believe bridgebuilding fits within, supports, and advances the national service mission:

- **National service already has a considerable track record of success in connecting people across difference** and a legacy of public commitment to increasing social and civic cohesion. AmeriCorps members have connected with fellow Corps members and community members across lines of race, ethnicity, religion, education, and economic status. Making this bridging and the associated skill-building a much more explicit focus and purpose of national service would build on and expand that success. And we want to build on past success to expand that bridgebuilding capacity to include many more opportunities for bridging across people with different viewpoints.
- **Leveraging the ethic and skills of bridgebuilding will improve service outcomes.** National service already has a deep programmatic portfolio devoted to helping communities become healthier, more resilient, and better able to address their common challenges. And we know that service conducted *for*—rather than *with*—communities falls short on impact and is often counterproductive. Service *with* requires Corps members trained and experienced in exactly the same mindsets and skills that are required for effective bridgebuilding. In other words, equipping Corps members to accomplish civic bridgebuilding also equips them to improve the outcomes of their service.
- **Bridgebuilding can boost recruitment and retention.** Just like the military, police departments, and schools, national service is facing big challenges with recruiting and retaining participants. We believe embracing the bridgebuilding mission would help meet those challenges. That's because the skills of navigating conflict and difference — the essential elements of building civic bridges — are also the keys to unlocking success in all parts of life. Employers across all sectors of our economy are seeking to hire people who have these critical skills. These employers, whose American workforces grow more diverse by the day, understand that when people from different walks of life work together “they

make better decisions and solve problems more creatively than homogenous groups do,” in the words of researchers at the University of California at Berkeley.

Here’s why we believe success is within reach for a national service community that meaningfully prioritizes building civic bridges across our painful divides:

- **Wide majorities support bridgebuilding.** Two-thirds of Americans say they are frustrated and even disgusted with ideological food fights — and hungry for people coming together to solve our common problems. The nonpartisan organization [More In Common](#) says that members of this “exhausted majority” are likely to see the “unifying story of ‘us’ [as] more powerful than the ‘us-versus them’ narratives that divide us as Americans from each other.” More than three-quarters of Americans say they would be willing to connect with people with different political perspectives if the conversation is safe and respectful.
- **Bridgebuilding is grounded in evidence.** Decades of randomized controlled trials of Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport’s [Contact Theory](#), bolstered by the more modern work of Linda Tropp and Thomas Pettigrew, definitively show that bringing groups together in safe well-controlled settings can dramatically reduce disdain, prejudice, feelings of threat, perceptions of negative intentions, and beliefs that differences are broader than they are. This is true even in societies emerging from civil war and genocide. The effects are particularly strong when people come together over extended periods of time to engage together in accomplishing a shared mission — exactly what national service does very well.
- **National service can tap into military experience, which has long been celebrated for its effectiveness in creating strong bonds across difference.** Though military bridgebuilding is sometimes mythologized to an extreme, there is no denying the long-lasting connections that many members of the military forge. Contact theory might assert that some of that is simple proximity, of course, but there is intentional design and discipline too. From the moment military recruits begin their training, officers present them with difficult missions that can only be accomplished if all team members have each other’s backs.
- **National service engages the ideal age group.** As is the case with the military, the vast majority of national service programs engage young people – the perfect age and stage for developing the “will and skill” for bridgebuilding across difference. Young people are typically more idealistic than members of other groups, and research also shows that they are also at a stage of development at which they are especially open to new information, perspectives, and experiences.



Photo credit: California Volunteers Social Media

#CaliforniansForAll College Corps members from California State University, Monterey Bay, pictured here, are part of the first-of-its-kind initiative launched in partnership with California colleges and universities to create debt-free pathways to college while engaging students across the state in solving problems in their communities. College Corps engaged over 3,000 students in its first year, and, notably, is being intentional and explicit about helping participants development and practice bridging skills as a core part of their service experience.

- **Making progress does not require participants to alter their political views, surrender dearly held values, or forgive transgressions.** Forget images of singing “Kumbaya” or forcing people to change their minds or compromise. Reducing polarization requires only that people open their minds — with more curiosity and less certainty; more active listening and less judgment; and more appreciation of our common humanity and less defaulting to stereotypes.
- **We already have good tools for measuring outcomes.** Dozens of bridge-building organizations are now using a shared measurement platform, the Social Cohesion Impact Measure (SCIM), which focuses on four outcomes from bridgebuilding programming — affective polarization, intellectual humility, intergroup empathy, and pluralistic norms — using research validated questions.



“I am grateful for all those involved with AmeriCorps for your dedication to a cause greater than self. Your compassionate efforts demonstrate the great character of our country and inspire others to build a more hopeful society.

- President George W. Bush

Recommendations and Action Items

Four Elements Necessary for Success

Even as our enthusiasm and optimism continued to grow through our exploration, we also heard — and agree with — four critical caveats about how difficult this work will be.

1. **Be Realistic:** Asking whether national service can fully resolve our differences and reduce our divisiveness is the wrong question. No single strategy will solve our toxic polarization challenge, which is a complex phenomenon and the product of many ongoing and even some worsening factors. The better question is: How might national service make a useful contribution to lowering the heat, building resilience, reducing violence, and strengthening civic infrastructure in our communities?
2. **Change is Hard:** Changes to AmeriCorps’s program goals, expectations, practices, and demographics have only happened in conjunction with significant and coordinated internal and external effort. We know this from long personal experience.
3. **No One Size Fits All:** The AmeriCorps ecosystem brings uneven capacity to address our communities’ multiple divides. Only a small number of programs are currently positioned to bridge the longest divides — that is, across the chasm of political and ideological difference.

4. **Humility, Always:** We must — and do — bring a high degree of humility about the accuracy, utility, and applicability of our insights. After all, national service is a complex ecosystem animated by strong and varied interests. Additionally, bridgebuilding in America is a quite new and fast-developing domain, so certainty about it would be misplaced.

Tough, But Necessary National Service Conversations

We hold the current leadership of CNCS and the state commissions that administer AmeriCorps in high regard — and know they face intense pressures every day. Given that we're no longer in those hot seats, we have license to provoke conversations that we could not have generated when our official roles required us to reflect Congress' and the White House's perspectives on AmeriCorps and national service.

The recommendations and perspectives we're promoting through this No Greater Mission initiative are meant to help spur useful conversation, innovation, and collaboration between and among leaders, experts, funders, and practitioners across the national service landscape as well as the bridgebuilding field and the movements for democratic renewal and pluralism.

We don't, however, believe that connecting people and groups across their differences will be easy, much less likely, without hard work. We'll need all key parts of the national service ecosystem — not only CNCS but the states, grantees, alumni, and private partners and funders — to work collaboratively, and in partnership with the bridgebuilding field, in retooling the programs to forcefully and explicitly make tackling the crisis of polarization a top-level priority.

Several conversations about that retooling may be especially bracing, particularly these, which are addressed within the section on recommendations:

- More intentionally centering the Corps member experience;
- Rebalancing the service outcomes incentivized and measured;
- Building new approaches to recruitment, retention, and benefits of Corps members;
- Establishing elements of training and experiences that should become universal across all of national service;
- Reimagining the role and engagement of Corps member alums; and,
- Reframing how national service articulates its societal relevance and ROI.

SERVICE MEASURES: FROM TRANSACTIONAL TO TRANSFORMATIONAL

The AmeriCorps mission is, “To improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.” However, those inspiring aspirations have been undermined by an overreliance on transactional “point of service” measures — the numbers of tutored children, pounds of food distributed, miles of beaches cleaned, acres of planted trees, and so on.

These transactional data points will always be important for assessing service results. However, the pendulum has swung too far, resulting in programs that have become organized around transactional and siloed measures rather than the transformation of corps members into community leaders and pillars of local civic infrastructure.

Framing programs to maximize the transformative nature of the training and experience is an area in which AmeriCorps has much to learn from the military, the Peace Corps, service learning, and teacher professional corps.

Tough, But Necessary Bridgebuilding Conversations

The bridgebuilding field is a “cottage industry” made up of thousands of mostly disconnected, young organizations on steep learning curves. Key leadership initiatives like BMAC are making good headway supporting greater collaboration and alignment across the field, as well as moving important collective initiatives forward. Successful work has included establishing goals and measures, developing and socializing best practices, executing national events and campaigns, shaping field-wide narratives, building rapid response capabilities, creating and testing common evaluation vehicles, raising funds for collective priorities, engaging policymakers and more.

We know that most Americans will not line up to be “depolarized” at bridgebuilding organizations — which is why the above “Bridging Goals & Measures” infographic clarifies that a core goal of the bridgebuilding field is to mobilize other sectors, partnering with them to build civic bridges where people live, work, study, worship, play and, yes, serve. Partnering with the national service field is not only entirely consistent with the essential strategy of the bridgebuilding field, but critical for success. The success of service programs in bridging divides will correspond directly to the effectiveness of bridgebuilding/national service partnerships to infuse best-practice approaches into Corps member training and experiences.

KATRINA AS INSPIRATION

We've seen vivid demonstrations of AmeriCorps' unique capability to support civic bridgebuilding in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters. Katrina was AmeriCorps's most challenging and finest moment. AmeriCorps programs around the country sent tens of thousands of volunteers to Louisiana and Mississippi to help devastated, traumatized communities rebuild. Across the liberal city of New Orleans and conservative rural towns, AmeriCorps members engaged, by necessity and with great results, in serving with individuals and groups bringing wildly disparate backgrounds and perspectives to achieve the common goal of restoring normal life in the Gulf.

If AmeriCorps can respond effectively to our current Category 5 civic hurricane, we believe that will also help solve almost all of the most vexing challenges AmeriCorps has faced for decades. We believe that rising to this urgent national purpose would:

- drive demand for the power, effectiveness, and relevance of national service at the community level
- enable AmeriCorps to meaningfully address its tough challenges around recruitment and retention;
- result in corps members having training and experiences that will make them more marketable and increase their professional and life success;
- offer corps members more varied and fulfilling opportunities to serve in a much broader array of communities, especially rural communities that have not participated fully in the national service movement and;
- improve the trust and enthusiasm of policymakers who don't agree or have different views.

However, for these partnerships to be the most effective, bridgebuilders must take stock of several challenges endemic to the field:

- Most organizations in the bridgebuilding field, but by no means all, are led and staffed by people who lean progressive, which requires significant attention to make bridging spaces welcoming and safe for conservatives and to ensure that programs don't in fact or in appearance have a purpose of changing conservative's minds. This will be especially important in partnering with national service programs, which also tend to lean left.
- Most bridging organizations focus their programs entirely on supporting effective conversations between people from different perspectives that lead to greater understanding and trust. However, significant research suggests that the effects of bridgebuilding can be made stronger and more sustainable when programs include what the researchers call "superordinate goals," bringing people together across their divides to accomplish something that all value. Because most forms of service target outcomes that

make great superordinate goals, partnering with national service organizations and engaging Corps members offers bridgebuilding organizations important pathways to strengthen their impact.

→ Nobody wakes up in the morning saying, “I’m going to bridgebuild or connect across difference today!” Like volunteering, training, studying, convening and more, connecting and collaborating are categories of work that simply don’t move as many people as making tangible progress on work they care about. People might want to improve our local schools, strengthen community-police relationships, help local immigrants succeed, ensure trustworthy information about local elections, etc. Allyships between bridgebuilders and service-based organizations will help illuminate for the entire community how effective bridgebuilding can lead directly to achieving the goals and solutions people care about.

Five Recommendations and Action Items

The polarization crisis presents AmeriCorps and the growing bridgebuilding field with an all-hands-on-deck moment to reduce disdain, outrage, and violence; increase connections; strengthen collaboration; make public dialogue more constructive and drive new assets toward a functional civic infrastructure.

Important but nascent experiments at the national, state, and local levels are moving forward. The question now becomes: How can we expand and accelerate this work to date and catalyze the deeper partnerships between the broader national service and civic bridgebuilding communities that are required to move the needle on increasing connections across difference in our communities.

To help AmeriCorps and the bridgebuilding field maximize this potential, we share the following recommendations. Under each recommendation, we present a list of concrete action items that would help bring that recommendation to fruition. Our hope is that all interested parties across the national service and bridgebuilding ecosystems can find resonant and relevant entry points for further engagement and action.

1 Equip all Corps Members with “Civic CPR,” enabling them to connect across conflict, collaborate, and become lifelong bridgebuilders.

In the same way that all lifeguards learn how to perform CPR, all Corps members should learn “civic CPR” — the basic mindsets and skills necessary for connecting across difference — and earn a certification for doing so.

As a result, all Corps members would emerge from their service experience with greater listening and collaboration skills; the self-awareness to recognize bias; sufficient emotional self-regulation to engage with people with whom they disagree; and a mindset that seeks opportunities for building trust, even in unlikely circumstances.

The skills that are vital for building civic bridges are the same skills required for effective collaboration, teamwork, and conflict management in many other settings from the workplace to community to family life. We believe this civic CPR will help equip Corps members to achieve success and happiness as well as to become mainstays of local civic infrastructure. Likewise, we are hopeful that the civic CPR certification would meaningfully boost corps members' post-service job offers.

Most AmeriCorps programs currently offer some opportunities for Corps members to experience and practice bridgebuilding. Some programs might be able to offer nothing more than *basic* civic CPR. These would be programs with Corps that are mostly homogenous and where corps members serve within communities and groups whose backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives are similar to the Corps members'.

Other programs, such as those whose teams hold a diversity of viewpoints and those who serve in communities with perspectives very different from those of Corps members, have an opportunity to go deeper on bridgebuilding. Where connecting across differences is more central to success, programs might offer Corps members more advanced versions of civic CPR as well as more extensive opportunities to practice those skills experientially.

We also recommend investing in opportunities for Corps members to participate in supplemental activities through which they can bridge across longer divides, with an emphasis on experiencing and practicing bridgebuilding across polarized perspectives. We see this as an area ripe for accelerated innovation, experimentation, and learning.

How to put this recommendation into action *within the service experience*:

- Provide all Corps members with high-quality civic CPR training.
- Establish a certification program, establishing: eligibility, required activity, required level of performance, and pathways for nomination and approval as well as program model, funding and branding.
- Even programs with little natural viewpoint diversity across Corps members and community should find or create simple, local opportunities for Corps members to experience viewpoint diversity.
- Go beyond basic civic CPR when connecting across difference is more central to the service experience and to successful service outcomes.
 - Offer Corps members deeper bridgebuilding training and experiences, including facilitation and conflict management.
 - Test program innovations in which Corps members help polarized groups work together, build trust, and find common ground.
 - Integrate and prioritize bridgebuilding programming and training in all national service grant competitions.

- Offer relief from the so-called “80/20 rule,” which limits training and professional development to 20 percent of service hours. This relief could be accomplished by changing the 80/20 rule generally, by exempting bridgebuilding activities from the rule, or by normalizing the use of waiver authority to expand bridgebuilding capacity.
- Provide training in civic CPR and bridgebuilding mindsets and skills to program staff in order for them to successfully support Corps members.
- Expand the number of “days of service” to include large, intensive, and ongoing multi-program service projects with bridgebuilding components.
- Expand age-integrated service. This could include joint service projects involving AmeriCorps and AmeriCorpsSeniors, and also age-integrated AmeriCorps programs such as Generations Serving Together.
- Expand service that builds meaningful connections across ideological divides, including age-integrated service, service across urban-rural divides, and service connecting Corps members with active military or veterans.
- Do no harm.
 - Guide staff and Corps members away from demeaning or villainizing groups of Americans whose beliefs are different than those they share.
 - Include appropriate diversities of perspectives in education and context-setting for Corps members about issues.

How to put this recommendation into action *beyond the service experience*:

- Initiate service exchanges that would allow Corps members to switch places with peers serving in communities with vastly different demographic or ideological makeups. See the [American Exchange Project](#) for a model of what a “service exchange” might look like.
- Encourage Corps members to participate in local bridgebuilding events and programs.
- Encourage Corps members to volunteer, outside of service hours, to support local bridgebuilding organizations.
- Give or award scholarships for Corps members to participate in special bridgebuilding trainings or experiences, including in different locations.



Photo Credit: Emily Firman Pieper, American Exchange Project.

American Exchange Project participants prepare for a summer powwow with the Santee Sioux tribe in Flandreau, South Dakota. Potentially a model for Corps member exchanges across programs, the free domestic program offers high school seniors nationwide a chance “to see red and blue in a whole new light” by enabling them to spend a week in an American community very different from their own.

2 Increase diversity, especially viewpoint diversity, across the national service ecosystem.

About 15 years ago, AmeriCorps members were disproportionately wealthy and privileged. AmeriCorps has since developed important and mostly successful pathways for engaging people from a broad range of different backgrounds and circumstances, with a special emphasis on recruiting “opportunity youth.” This success in expanding the profile of AmeriCorps members demonstrates that, with real and sustained focus, AmeriCorps can significantly influence the make-up of the Corps.



Photo Credit: AmeriCorps

CoGenerate brings together older and younger generations to work on shared challenges that are felt by both generations, e.g., like food insecurity, isolation, and loneliness. Pictured here an AmeriCorps Senior and AmeriCorps Member work side-by-side in the kitchen on a project supported by a CoGenerate Generations Serving Together grant. This photo of Generations Serving Together, an initiative of CoGenerate, showcases new and powerful models of older and younger AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers working side by side to serve the community.

To date, AmeriCorps has struggled to engage participants and programs that represent the full range of political or ideological viewpoints. This lack of viewpoint diversity has had the effect of shrinking the pool of prospective Corps members and grantees as well as its roster of champions and supporters. Even if America’s polarization crisis makes it more difficult, we must find ways to engage more applicants, programs, and funders from across the political spectrum.

We’ve always experienced the challenge of viewpoint diversity to be a chicken-or-egg dilemma. Without viewpoint diversity, it’s difficult to be welcoming to all of the prospective programs and Corps members we wish would apply. And without those people and programs connecting with the programs, it’s difficult to build enough viewpoint diversity to be welcoming.

Now is the moment to break the cycle, when the crisis of polarization is broadly recognized as a top-level concern by civic organizations and young people of all stripes and beliefs. We see a timely and unique opportunity for a focus on bridgebuilding to attract and welcome grantees and Corps members who span a broader spectrum of viewpoints than national service has ever enjoyed.

How to put this recommendation into action:

- Identify and address areas of ongoing underrepresentation in the AmeriCorps community (e.g., rural, faith-based, age-based).

- ❑ Lower the application burden, provide more support to new applicants during the application process, and engage civil society champions to recruit unlikely prospective grantees.
- ❑ Prioritize planning grants and program funding for intermediary organizations equipped to handle AmeriCorps administrative and training responsibilities so that more small nonprofits can participate in AmeriCorps.
- ❑ Deploy well-trained Corps members to work in community and faith-based organizations that may be too small or inexperienced to effectively manage AmeriCorps obligations on their own.
- ❑ Create a fellowship/voucher approach that makes it possible for individuals to find their own AmeriCorps placement at an organization of their choosing.
- ❑ Revive the goal of Corps members recruiting (and sometimes training and supervising) community volunteers, to put Corps members in touch with a broader group of people.
- ❑ Support existing and prospective grantees to adopt service objectives likely to attract groups and people and communities with different perspectives, such as programs working on opioid addiction, rural job skilling, food insecurity, veteran support, and adoption.
- ❑ Explore joint recruiting with the military, so that more people with divergent viewpoints discover AmeriCorps opportunities.

3 Build strong, two-way bridges between the national service and bridgebuilding communities.

At the national, state, and local levels, new connections between the worlds of bridgebuilding and national service would likely generate a wide range of opportunities for both platforms, some of which are easy to imagine and others that will emerge more organically. Certainly, the ecosystems of national service and bridgebuilding would each benefit from collaborating with the other.

We believe that these connections will increase participation in and the quality of both service and bridgebuilding and will accelerate shared learning.

How to put this recommendation into action:

- ❑ The burgeoning bridgebuilding field should help national service programs develop best-practice bridgebuilding programming, measurement tools, and advisory capacity at the national and local levels.

- ❑ AmeriCorps should issue a special notice of funds availability (NOFA) for bridgebuilding organizations. This could take multiple forms, including planning grants, full AmeriCorps grants, and the development of training materials to be used in AmeriCorps programming.
- ❑ Bridgebuilding organizations should consider applying for AmeriCorps grants, leveraging AmeriCorps members to strengthen and scale their bridgebuilding work.
- ❑ Bridgebuilding coalitions should help service organizations identify relevant bridgebuilding outcomes.
- ❑ The national service ecosystem should seek help from bridgebuilding practitioners, funders, and researchers to speed up the learning curve (and avoid rookie mistakes). This can include creating formal advisory groups or less-formal collaboration.
- ❑ Bridgebuilding coalitions and funders should support bridgebuilding organizations to become national service grantees.
- ❑ Bridgebuilding organizations should regard Corps members and AmeriCorps alums as potential allies and invite them to participate in local bridgebuilding activities.
- ❑ Bridgebuilding organizations should consider incorporating service programming as a vehicle for engaging more people across differences.

4 Equip AmeriCorps alums to help build civic bridges all across America.

While some notable grantees do a terrific job engaging their alumni, the broader AmeriCorps ecosystem has historically underinvested in its alumni. With greater investment, former AmeriCorps members could become powerful civic assets, just like military veterans and Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. Investing in the ongoing development, support, and engagement of AmeriCorps alums will not only strengthen the program itself; it can make AmeriCorps alums a valuable resource for strengthening and scaling the work of bridgebuilding and resilience-building in communities across the country.

How to put this recommendation into action:

- ❑ Establish an Office of Alumni Engagement inside CNCS.
- ❑ Plan, resource, and execute AmeriCorps alums–based activities that engage people and groups together across their divides.
- ❑ Create special recognition for AmeriCorps alums who have leveraged their service experience to strengthen social cohesion, lower threats of violence, and/or enhance the

sense of belonging in their communities.

- Establish an AmeriCorps Alumni Reserve Corps, a civilian analog to the National Guard, which can be called up and deployed in times of need.
- Develop a new grant program and/or modify applications and competition frameworks to engage AmeriCorps alums, military veterans, Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, and retired civil servants in working together to solve community challenges.
- AmeriCorps Alums chapters should consider adopting local bridgebuilding organizations, programs, and/or campaigns to drive [end of sentence missing]
- Individual AmeriCorps alums should consider both engaging in bridgebuilding activities themselves as well as volunteering with or otherwise supporting local bridgebuilding organizations.

5 Accelerate research on bridgebuilding through service.

We could not be more confident in the profound opportunity that exists for Corps members to combat divisiveness, distrust, and disdain at the community level. And yet we also know that we need more research, data, and understanding to refine this work for maximum impact in the long run.

Effective research will be the key to improving and scaling different interventions. We hope that over the course of a few years the ideas associated with national service and bridgebuilding can climb the ladder from evidence-informed to evidence-based to proven.

How to put this recommendation into action:

- Assemble a research consortium of experts across various domains to establish a learning agenda for service and bridging. Include research leaders in a national service-learning-and-practice community on bridgebuilding.
- Collaborate with similar research efforts in the military, Peace Corps, nonprofit service programs, and the private sector.
- Coordinate with the bridgebuilding field's existing research efforts, including the Social Cohesion Impact Measure (SCIM) survey.
- Incentivize grantees to use a standard pre-post measurement instrument to assess the effectiveness of multiple forms of bridgebuilding training, experiences, and interventions. Incentives could include:
 - Relief from elements of annual reporting
 - Additional grant funds to support adoption of common evaluation processes

- Commitments of technical assistance
- Opportunities to receive data that would allow them to benchmark against other similar programs
- Participation in communities of learning and practice
- Eligibility for, or preferential treatment, in other grant competitions.

Next Steps Across the Ecosystems

The purpose of this **No Greater Mission** venture is to catalyze further conversation and action around a big commitment by national service to prioritize connecting across difference as a central objective, activity, and outcome of national service. Of course, change like this is not linear, and we are not in a position to map out exactly how this change will occur. We do know that it will take contributions from various actors and angles for this to happen. Accordingly, we offer a few suggestions about who can do what to accelerate the action that is already beginning to happen in this space.

What **CNCS / AmeriCorps** can do:

- ☐ Be clear and explicit that connecting across difference is a priority objective and intended service outcome of AmeriCorps.
- ☐ Embrace Corps member skill development, especially the mindsets and skills related to connecting across difference, as a central outcome of national service. Have this expectation reflected in grant competitions and program review and evaluations.
- ☐ Make a clear commitment to a sustained effort to increase viewpoint diversity in the ranks of AmeriCorps members and grantees.
- ☐ Fund innovative efforts by states and grantees to advance Corps member development and prioritize connecting across difference or take other actions like the use of waivers to make this kind of innovative activity more possible.
- ☐ Develop and disseminate a civic CPR curriculum that all AmeriCorps programs can use to help Corps members develop bridgebuilding mindsets and skills.
- ☐ Launch an office of Alumni Affairs to supercharge the idea of AmeriCorps alums as a crucial civic asset.

What can **legislators, governors, and other policymakers** can do:

- ☐ Connect service and efforts to reduce polarization.
- ☐ Pass something similar to the Building Civic Bridges Act.
- ☐ Give AmeriCorps the resources and flexibility to truly engage in this endeavor.
- ☐ Support AmeriCorps to create an office of AmeriCorps Alumni.

What **funders** can do:

- ☐ Support experimentation and innovation in bridgebuilding efforts outside the core service experience, such as days of service and service exchange.
- ☐ Encourage community foundations to invest in connecting local service and bridging opportunities.
- ☐ Support programs and Corps member convenings at a state, regional, or national level for bridgebuilding training and experiences.
- ☐ Support partnership development and planning between bridgebuilding and national service programs.
- ☐ Support efforts that engage AmeriCorps alums in bridgebuilding activities, especially activities that connect AmeriCorps alums to veterans of military service and Returned Peace Corps Volunteers.
- ☐ Support efforts of bridgebuilding and democracy-supporting organizations to make initial forays into engaging national service members.
- ☐ Support research to determine and document the most effective ways to incorporate bridgebuilding into national service.

What **bridgebuilding and pluralism-promoting organizations** can do:

- ☐ Identify AmeriCorps grantees in communities served by the bridgebuilding organization and discuss opportunities to strengthen service outcomes while strengthening connections across difference for Corps members and/or the community.
- ☐ Apply for grants to bring national service members to serve in their organizations.
- ☐ Prepare curricula, training, and exercises that support AmeriCorps programs and members in developing and practicing bridgebuilding mindset and skills.
- ☐ Engage AmeriCorps alums in their programming.
- ☐ Engage bridgebuilding participants in serving together as a pathway toward strengthening the outcomes from bridgebuilding experiences.

What **researchers** can do:

- ☐ Design and help implement studies to answer the following questions:
 - What are the strengths and weaknesses of different program interventions?

- What bridgebuilding activities do the most to improve and strengthen the outcomes of national service programs?
 - Which best practices from the bridgebuilding community translate well to service-based models and which do not?
 - Which service objectives are most helpful in recruiting diverse participants?
 - How durable are the bridging mindsets that Corps members gain during their service year?
 - How can alumni most effectively support bridgebuilding?
- Create a research consortium to ensure sustained interest.
 - Publish a special issue of a journal on this specific topic.

Conclusion

Thirty years ago this year, President Bill Clinton signed the bill creating AmeriCorps. He spoke about AmeriCorps's potential to "help us rebuild our troubled but wonderful land" and strengthen "the cords that bind us together as a people." He was flanked by idealistic young recruits and veterans of some of the other national service programs launched by previous presidents:

- Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps,
- John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps,
- Lyndon B. Johnson's Foster Grandparents and Retired and Senior Volunteer Program,
- Richard M. Nixon's Senior Companions Program,
- Ronald Reagan's President's Private Sector Initiative,
- George H.W. Bush's Commission on National and Community Service nonprofit demonstration programs that became the anchor programs in AmeriCorps.

Since AmeriCorps launched that day, more than a million Americans have answered the call to serve their country. They have mentored young people who need more caring adults in their life; planted millions of trees; provided support to families and communities reeling from natural disasters; augmented badly overstretched health care systems during the COVID pandemic; and built thousands of homes. In addition, they worked shoulder to shoulder with millions of community members, and forged relationships that have shaped millions of lives.

Also, over the past 30 years, polarization has become toxic and ubiquitous in our communities, requiring deep and sustained work to connect and build understanding and increased trust across increasingly painful divides – civic bridgebuilding work that has been undertaken increasingly by a growing field of civic bridgebuilders.

Today, America needs more from AmeriCorps, which has yet to realize its full promise; and American communities urgently need to catalyze connections and understanding across

difference in the face of polarized misperceptions. That's why we set out together across our own partisan divide to sketch out how AmeriCorps could partner with the bridgebuilding field to focus its unique assets and energies on helping communities bridge divides of race, class, geography and ideology. Now is the time to bring all of AmeriCorps' assets to bear on reducing the harmful divisiveness in our communities, building civic pathways for healing, and reigniting a sense of common purpose.

Appendix 1: Definitions

Affective polarization is a term used to describe the growing divide in emotional attitudes and feelings between individuals based on their political affiliations. It refers to the phenomenon where individuals' emotions, and sentiments towards members of their own group become more positive, while their emotions towards members of the opposing group become more negative and distorted, with their differences exaggerated. Affective polarization often leads to increased hostility, animosity, and a reduced willingness to compromise or work together with people who hold different political views.

Bridgebuilding brings people together across conflict or lines of difference to help them increase their mutual trust and understanding, often in service of solving common problems. Effective bridging requires no compromise or validation of other's beliefs—only a willingness to listen with curiosity. In the words of researchers at the Greater Good Science Center, “The true goal of bridging differences isn't to convince the other person of your viewpoint or even necessarily to build consensus.... You may disagree with another person, sometimes vehemently. But the key is that you don't dehumanize them in the process.”

Bridgebuilding field is the rapidly growing network of nonprofit organizations working to build connections across lines of difference, especially ideology and politics. Some of these organizations focus on specific local communities, while some are national or international in scope. All of them are “rooted in highlighting shared humanity, helping people find common ground, creating spaces for people to listen to those with differing views, and encouraging people to reflect on the roots of their own worldviews,” in the words of the Aspen Institute.

Moralization is a distortion of polarization through which we believe the people we disagree with are acting immorally, even illegally and out to destroy sacred values. This non-factual belief can justify a sense of obligation and passion for attacking and demeaning those we disagree with.

Motive misattribution refers to the polarization-driven distortion or cognitive bias by which individuals incorrectly attribute negative motives like hate or vindictiveness to the positions and actions of groups we oppose, while we believe our own group operates out of only the most positive motives, like love.

National service represents multiple forms of civilian volunteering service that are supported by the federal government. National service has played an important part in our national psyche since Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps, in 1933. National service programs promote an ethos of service; provide young people valuable experiences, skills, and networks; offer elders pathways for contributing their skills and wisdom; and make direct contributions to solving important community and national challenges. AmeriCorps, launched in 1993, provides funding to thousands of different national service organizations and initiatives around the country. It also manages AmeriCorps VISTA (formerly known simply as VISTA) and the National Civilian Conservation Corps (NCCC).

National service ecosystem includes the full set of actors that play important roles in the shaping and deployment of AmeriCorps include: the federal agency AmeriCorps, state service commissions, grantee programs, Corps members, host communities, private funders, alums, and policymakers.

Pluralism is an ethos that celebrates the differences within a society and respects groups' desire to maintain distinctive cultural identities and practices. It stands in stark contrast to tolerating, ignoring, erasing, or excluding difference. In bridgebuilding work, it is often invoked in the context of safeguarding our "pluralistic democracy."

State Service Commissions appointed by the Governor of each state, administer several elements of AmeriCorps programming, including supporting significant numbers of Corps-member centered program grantees." Some Commissions, such as those in California and Maryland, operate as cabinet-level agencies.

Toxic Polarization refers to an extreme form of political polarization characterized by intense hostility, animosity, and a toxic atmosphere between individuals or groups with differing political beliefs. It involves the deepening of divisions, often fueled by strong negative emotions, such as anger, hatred, and contempt, towards those who hold opposing political views. Toxic polarization is marked by a lack of constructive dialogue, a tendency to dehumanize or demonize the other side, and a disregard for seeking common ground or understanding. It can have detrimental effects on civil discourse, social cohesion, and the ability to find solutions to societal challenges.

Appendix 2: Interviewees

Kristen Bennett: Chief Executive Officer, Service Year Alliance

John Bridgeland: Executive Chairman & Chief Executive Officer, More Perfect; Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Civic Enterprises

Allison Briscoe-Smith: Project Lead of Connecting Californians through Service Project, The Greater Good Science Center; Diversity Lead, University of Washington

Michael Brown: Co-Founder, City Year; Principal, Public Purpose Strategies LLC

Rachel Brown: Executive Director, Over Zero

Neil Bush: Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Neil Bush Global Advisers; Chair, Points of Light Board of Directors

Kyle Caldwell: President & Chief Executive Officer, Council of Michigan Foundations

Kristen Cambell: Chief Executive Officer, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE)

Dan Cardinali: Senior Fellow, PolicyLink; Former President & Chief Executive Officer, Independent Sector

Peter T. Coleman: Professor of Psychology & Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

AnnMaura Connolly: President, Voices for National Service

Itai Dinour: Executive Director, Carmel Hill Fund

Kaira Esgate: Chief Executive Officer, America's Service Commission (ASC)

David Fairman: Senior Mediator, Consensus Building Institute (CBI)

Marc Freedman: Founder/Co-Chief Executive Officer, CoGenerate (Formerly Encore.org)

Linda Frey: Director, #CaliforniansForAll College Corps, California Volunteers, Office of the Governor

Josh Fryday: Chief Service Officer, California Volunteers, Office of the Governor

Archon Fung: Ford Foundation Professor of Democracy & Citizenship, Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Bishop Garrison: Vice President of Policy, Intelligence & National Security Alliance

Mark Gearan: President Emeritus, Hobart & William Smith Colleges; Former Director, Peace Corps; Vice Chair for National & Public Service, National Commission on Military, National & Public Service

Robert Godfried: Policy Entrepreneur, Next100

Stephen Goldsmith: Derek Bok Professor of the Practice of Urban Policy, Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Robert Gordon: Head of Business Development, Growth, & Community, Searchlight.ai

Nick Greer: Former Executive Vice President of Interconnection, Thread Inc.

Lilliana Hall Mason: SNF Agora Institute Associate Professor of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University

Kristin Hansen: Executive Director, Civic Health Project

Joe Heck: Brigadier General, U.S. Army Reserve; Former Member of Congress

Sarah Hemminger: Co-Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Thread Inc.

Jennifer Hoos Rothberg: Executive Director, Einhorn Collaborative

Liz Joyner: Founder & Chief Executive Officer, The Village Square

Brandyn Keating: Founder & Chief Executive Officer, YOUNify

Whitney Kimball Coe: Vice President of National Programs & Director of the Rural Assembly, Center for Rural Strategies

Max Klau: Chief Program Officer, New Politics Leadership Academy

Kyle Kline: Director, Minnesota Alliance with Youth; Co-Chair, AmeriCorps NCCC Alumni Collaborative

Koby Langley: Senior Vice President, The American Red Cross

Peter Levine: Associate Dean of Academic Affairs & Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship & Public Affairs, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University

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