



EVIDENCE SNAPSHOT

# Climate Impact Corps Case Study



BUNDLED EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT

## Introduction

Climate Impact Corps, one of the ten AmeriCorps programs implemented by Ampact and headquartered in Minneapolis, MN, was selected as one of the five projects to include as a case study for the AmeriCorps Climate Change Bundled Evaluation and Capacity Building study given its focus on Environmental Stewardship and Community Capacity Building.

During a 2-day site visit in November 2023 to Ampact, researchers conducted individual interviews with:

- 1 program director,
- 1 evaluator,
- 2 program staff, and
- 2 staff members from two separate partner organizations.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of anonymizing responses, references to project staff include responses that may have been made by project staff and the evaluator from ServeMinnesota Service Commission.

A focus group with eight Climate Impact Corps members was also held, comprising five members with at least 1 year of AmeriCorps service and three members who more recently started their first year of AmeriCorps service. During the visit, researchers were also able to observe Climate Impact Corps on-site and field-based training sessions. This case study largely focuses on the program's activities within the areas of Environmental Stewardship and Community Capacity Building to reflect the original purpose for including the program as a case study. However, the project also has a smaller initiative for Home Energy and information about that focus is included. Documents such as grant applications, progress reports, tracking data, and training materials were also collected and reviewed. These documents helped to better understand the activities and status of each program's work and provided a basis for corroboration with stakeholder perspectives gleaned through the interviews and focus groups.

## Description of Program and Context

Ampact is a national nonprofit that was founded as the implementation arm of ServeMinnesota, Minnesota's Service Commission. The first program, Reading Corps, was launched in 2003. Specializing in managing and scaling high-quality AmeriCorps programs, Ampact currently has 10 evidence-based AmeriCorps programs in 3 areas: education, environment, and healthy futures. Organizationally, its mission is to transform lives. As leaders and innovators, Ampact is working to demonstrate the power of national service to address complex social issues.

Climate Impact Corps is situated in the environmental area of Ampact. Members serving in this corps use evidence-based strategies to help communities mitigate and adapt to climate change. According to Ampact's grant application, Minnesota is experiencing higher temperatures, more extreme weather, flooding, and changes in the ecosystem. These climate changes are a result of increasing concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. In the Twin Cities, annual average temperatures increased by 3.2 degrees from 1951 to 2020, which was faster than both the national and global rates of increase.

Within Climate Impact Corps there are three initiatives to address climate change in Minnesota:

- Community Forestry,
- Community Resilience, and
- Home Energy.

The three initiatives align with Minnesota's Climate Action Framework, which is the state's climate action plan. Through Climate Impact Corps, organizational capacity of the partner sites is being built by increasing their reach, efficiency, and effectiveness as defined by AmeriCorps operationalization of those three metrics.

At the time the site visit was conducted (November 2023), Climate Impact Corps was in its fourth year. The first year's focus was Community Forestry, with the addition of Home Energy in the second year, and Community Resilience in the third year. Currently, the program hires four types of members: Community Forestry, Home Energy, and community stewardship facilitators and sustainability project coordinators under the umbrella of Community Resilience. Starting next year, the focus areas will remain the same, but there will be one position type titled climate impact project coordinator. The target number of national service member positions is 100 and as of the end of November 2023, the program had 88 members serving. With rolling start dates of August, October, and January, Ampact anticipated filling those remaining openings in January 2024.

## Services Performed

This section will describe the primary services performed by members in each of the three initiative areas described above.





## Community Forestry

The Community Forestry program focuses on preserving and enhancing Minnesota’s tree canopy. Approximately 50 members are serving in this initiative. According to project staff, having a strong urban tree canopy is a climate solution that can have several impacts. Trees provide shade, which can have economic impacts in terms of decreasing costs for cooling buildings during the summer. Trees in the community also clean the air from wildfire smoke because it will both trap particulate matter on the tree and remove ground level ozone from the air, which has positive health impacts.

Members placed in organizations associated with Community Forestry mainly focus on planting trees, tree maintenance (e.g., watering), and tree inventory. Minnesota has increasing amounts of invasive pests such as the emerald ash borer. The role of some members in managing the tree canopy is to mark the trees that have been infested so that those trees can be removed. Members also plan events and do outreach with the community on forestry practices. Project staff explained, “They’ll also do outreach education around what is the emerald ash borer. They speak with community members if their tree is infested.”

## Community Resilience

Service members who are a part of the Community Resilience initiatives are providing services to implement various climate solutions and collaborating with the community to create cohesion that strengthens the community and makes it more resilient. The approximately 45 members serving in this initiative have position

titles of either community stewardship facilitators or sustainability project coordinators. Project staff shared that research shows when there is both increased social capital and sense of place this will lead to protective community actions. The member goal is to build people-to-people connections and people-to-place connections in order to create the conditions that lead to more community action.

Once placed with their partner sites, community stewardship facilitators are often tasked with the organization of community-based events and initiatives that seek to increase environmental awareness and action in the communities the partner site serves. One project staff explained:

*Their [members'] goal is to help build Community Resilience through community members themselves, trying to help people get that sense of connection with people to people and people to place. When people care about the space and they're in it, they're more likely to take action to take care of it. Like, 'Why we are here, what's this space, what's the history?' So doing those types of activities ... doing things like storm drain clean-ups or river ... pollinator garden installations and things like that. It's a wide variety and it kind of depends on what kind of site they're placed at too.*

Sustainability project coordinator member positions are often tasked with developing and/or maintaining initiatives to increase the sustainable practices of a partner organization. While these two member position types have differing technical titles and outlined tasks, both position types generally function to lead community-engaged sustainability projects, climate conversations, and environmental stewardship activities that “produce positive individual behavior change and community environmental action.”

Examples of projects implemented by community stewardship facilitators and sustainability coordinators included these two descriptions, the first from a member and the second from a partner:

- *I started my service this time in October so I am just through onboarding and [asset] mapping ... I do have my first project on the calendar and it's going to be [part of] a smart salting workshop, which is with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency program. That one is primarily directed toward larger business owners and apartment building owners. But I am going to do a smaller workshop for just residents and small business owners such as the local grocery store ... to teach them that you don't need to use as much salt as you think and it doesn't work if it's below zero so don't use it at all. And then be sure you sweep it up when you're done so it doesn't end up in the river or the lake.*
- *One of my favorite projects from last year is our steward [who] worked with the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. They were building a big high tunnel greenhouse to provide fresh food to the nation members. And [this member] wasn't Ojibwe. So [this member] went in and helped and everyone was like why is the White person here? They just thought it was kind of weird. But towards the end they really built up trust. And actually at the very end the person who was leading the project couldn't help out any more. And [this member] ended up being appointed to help out so they really built a lot of trust with the Tribal nation, which was really cool.*

## Home Energy

Ampact also has a smaller number of members (approximately five) serving in its Home Energy initiative, which historically places members within the state's Weatherization Assistance Program to complete Home Energy audits and weatherization work. Those service activities tie into the state's clean energy and efficient building goal within Minnesota's Climate Action Framework. There are more than 500,000 eligible households for this program, which is a low-income energy assistance and weatherization program and only 9 percent of them have been weatherized since 2005. Project staff explained that weatherization is important because it helps decrease people's energy bills and then the household uses less energy, which directly mitigates

climate change. There are also impacts on Community Resilience and health because it makes indoor air quality better.

## Role of Partners and Community Involvement

Presented in this section is a description of Ampact's relationships with its partners and involvement with the broader community.

### Partner Overview

At the time of the site visit, Climate Impact Corps reported partnerships with approximately 60 sites across the 3 initiatives (Community Forestry, Community Resilience, and Home Energy). Partners throughout the state vary widely in organizational makeup, including nonprofits, higher education institutions, state and regional extension offices, local/city/and state government administration, and soil and water conservation districts. Ampact accepts site applications from partners on a rolling basis and continues to expand its partner network. Examples of site partners include Project Sweetie Pie, a community-based organization in Minneapolis that engages residents in urban agriculture and social justice; and Clean Energy Resource Teams, a statewide partnership that supports clean energy projects and Community Resilience efforts.

For each partner site that “receives” members in a program year, members live within the communities they serve. AmeriCorps members placed in each site have a service plan that outlines the expected activities the member will conduct during their term with the partner. Given the wide variety of partner organizations, Climate Impact Corps staff work closely with the site partners to ensure each service plan aligns with the partners' programs and goals to create mutually beneficial partnerships. Additionally, the AmeriCorps program manager conducts two site visits and annual reviews to monitor the alignment of the member and partner relationship.

Throughout the member's placement with a partner site, a site supervisor is responsible for supervising their assigned members, which may include administrative requirements (member service hours); locating resources required for members to complete their service plan activities; and, as able, some partners may provide training relevant to member activities such as tree pruning, inventorying, and identification or seed planting.

The resources and member activities vary widely according to each partner site, and as such, allow exposure to a spectrum of focus areas in the green jobs sector.<sup>2</sup> In the words of one member, this creates a valuable experience to explore specific skill areas in a supervised environment:

*On a professional level, this job has carved out a niche for me ... my site supervisor and my coworker and some other folks got to go to Canada to get this seed certification that doesn't exist in the U.S. They are training professionals in the [Department of Natural Resources] how to collect seeds ... . My parents have been like, “Get a real job!” And I'm like, “Oh, I do have a job after this and there are opportunities for me.” I am just excited to continue doing this work and grateful for the things I've been able to learn on the job.*

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<sup>2</sup> A standard definition of green jobs does not exist. However, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics developed a two-pronged definition of green jobs ([Green Jobs: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)): (1) Jobs in businesses that produce goods and provide services that benefit the environment or conserve natural resources and (2) Jobs in which workers' duties involve making their establishment's production processes more environmentally friendly or use fewer natural resources.

Through interviews with two partner organizations, staff shared that one of the benefits of their collaboration with the Climate Impact Corps was that the members enabled them to provide added value toward their organizational missions. Apart from Aimpact offsetting the burden for individual organizations to recruit, screen, and “hire” members, the presence of members over an 11-month term reportedly allows partners to conduct needed tasks and information gathering that have been previously neglected due to a lack of capacity or resources to hire permanent staff. For example, a partner shared that the presence of members allowed for the creation of an inventory of ash trees. Through this inventory, the organization will now be able to determine which ash trees may die due to invasive emerald ash borers and mitigate the problem by planting new trees and understanding where problems might concentrate in the future.

## Community Involvement

The services members provide—especially as it relates to the Community Resilience initiative—are focused on capacity building and based on local needs. Project staff explained, “Because we provide that kind of flexibility and menu of different approaches, members are able to work on whatever needs to happen in that particular city.” For example, one member completed the first tree inventories for two cities; their needs were around increasing the tree canopy and responding to emerald ash borers. “That ability to adapt to what the truly local need is, I think, is a really strong part of our program. And really, I mean—fundamental—to climate resilience and what needs to happen in communities.”

Through the service projects that are implemented, members build the capacity of the individuals in the community to sustain the projects and climate solutions long-term. Although much of the program emphasis is on coalition building with other organizations to facilitate the connectedness of climate-focused organizations, members seek to involve individuals in the community by establishing relationships with residents and engaging in dialogue about climate solutions or priorities of the individuals. Additionally, members and project staff mention the simple practice of open offerings for assistance and having a presence in the community at spaces where individuals already feel comfortable is beneficial for involving their communities and by extension, building resilience. For example, project staff described a member who serves with a community-based Indigenous coalition and the member’s involvement with the community as follows:

*So, for example, the person that’s working in [town name] with that Indigenous environmental network—[member] is literally just showing up once a week to help them on their projects. And not, like, leading the action or anything at all; but just providing assistance. And I think that goes a long ways.*

A sustainability project coordinator member described their community involvement with Minnesota’s Forest Assisted Migration Project:

*I work with the Nature Conservancy and other organizations that are trying to reforest Minnesota with climate-smart seeds. I just collect tree seeds most of the time and process them. We work with a farmer’s cooperative that just formed to grow our seeds for us.*

A community member who is a member of her county’s Master Gardener program and is involved in this same project added:

*We [Master Gardeners] decided since one of our target areas or focus areas is climate change or adapting to a changing climate, the Forest Assisted Migration Program seemed like a good fit for us. So for the past couple of years, I have been the project lead for a tree seed collection project for master gardeners in [county name] ... we collect tree seeds in*



*central and southern Minnesota that will then be grown by designated growers into seedlings that are then planted up in northern Minnesota to replace the dying arboreal forest up there. The past few years we have undertaken collection of tree seeds from various tree species and delivered those to the state program that then sends them on their way through the process.*

For the Community Forestry initiative, community involvement was often observed through tree planting events. Project staff said, “The members’ sites will ask them to plan a tree planting event and they will organize it, they’ll get volunteers. Then they’ll teach those volunteers how to properly plant a tree. Then they’ll go out and do the tree planting as a group.”

Summing up the capacity building approach that Climate Impact Corps is using, one project staff shared:

*We’ve really tried to be innovative about creating a program design that allows partners to do the type of climate work that’s most impactful in their community. And I mean that’s really at the heart of this transition to capacity building. And so I feel like it’s not like rocket science, but it’s also kind of hard to do at times, the way that our typical program design happens.*

## National Service Members

The section describes the member recruitment and selection processes, members' reasons for joining the program, and member demographics. Also included are perceptions about the stipend and training received.

### Recruitment and Selection

One of the benefits of Climate Impact Corps being part of a large organization like Ampact is they have departments such as human resources, marketing, and compliance that can be leveraged to support the project. For example, Ampact has a recruiter assigned to work with Climate Impact Corps and the marketing department has launch kits, which include flyers, posters, and other materials that are sent to the partner sites so that they can advertise the member positions. Ampact also posts positions on its website and through other social media such as Indeed, Handshake, and area climate-specific job boards. Staff also use tabling at events and attend job fairs and, although staff indicated these latter two strategies are not the most effective for recruitment, they do provide name recognition. Project staff said most applications come through seeing postings on social media or the site-specific recruitment. However, project staff said the most successful strategy to recruit for diversity is when they intentionally reach out and engage partnerships with community-based organizations that are focused on supporting Black, Indigenous, and people of color—BIPOC—communities and work with those organizations to identify individuals within their community who may be good service member candidates.

When a prospective member submits a completed application it is screened and, for those applicants selected to be interviewed, an interview is conducted by Ampact staff. Because “fit” of a member to a site is so important, Ampact meets with each site individually in advance of the interviews to understand the site, their needs, and the projects that members will be supporting. This allows Ampact to match members effectively while also managing their recruitment process at scale.

For each of the initiatives, members are placed in sites throughout the state. The number of members at each site typically ranges from one to three. Climate Impact Corps project managers visit each site twice throughout the service term and conduct performance reviews. Site managers also provide feedback on each member's performance.

## Why Members Join

Half of the eight focus group participants said they became aware of the positions they serve in through social media sites and job postings. One member had a sibling who was an AmeriCorps member. One member was at a tabling event representing a board they serve on and Climate Impact Corps was in attendance. One member became aware of the service position through volunteer work they were doing and met the founder of one of the nonprofit partner sites. Yet another member heard about it through a presentation made by the project director.

When sharing their interest in climate change and prior involvement in community activities, all focus group participants spoke passionately about their desire to make a difference. They had been involved in volunteer efforts to the extent their schedules would allow and wanted to do more. One member shared:

*I'd already sort of been through the personal struggle or realizing that climate change was happening. And [I was thinking], like, "Can one person make a difference?" ... I feel like that started it off and it was like a snowball effect to how can I help and what can I do.*

Another member added:

*I had a similar experience where I would see the same infographic about the world ending, and so I was, like, well I might as well say I am contributing to something good. So I figured, like I said, it would be a worthy way of starting life outside of college.*

## Member Characteristics

Project staff said the majority of the Climate Impact Corps members are recent college graduates and in their 20s. For those members serving in the Community Resilience initiative, most are from the communities they serve, which is the preference because they have an existing connection.

Of the eight national service members participating in the focus group, five were returning for a second term with Climate Impact Corps. Members represented all three initiatives and were placed in sites throughout the state. Their educational backgrounds varied and they ranged in age from their early 20s through mid-60s. Types of educational and work experiences included political science, school paraprofessional, communication/journalism, sustainability, and editor/writer.

## Stipend

For Climate Impact Corps members who serve full-time a stipend of \$1,100 is received every 2 weeks and part-time members are paid half of that amount (\$650). Ubiquitously, members said the stipend was insufficient to meet their living needs and some shared examples of needing to obtain a second job to have sufficient resources. One member in their mid-30s shared that they tapped into their retirement savings and had a second job so they could "make ends meet." Project staff shared that in some instances members have had to exit early because financially they could not finish the term. Both project staff and members said the compensation is an equity issue and being able to serve is a privilege. One member said:

*The pay, we have the privilege of doing this ... for me, my spouse is a teacher and he has good salary and ... so, like, we have equity that not everybody has. So then I can work for the pay level that we work for. And that is my privilege so that is difficult. I don't know how it could be an equitable program without a change in the stipend.*





Project staff added:

*Because of historical inequities, a lot of people who come from those diverse backgrounds can't always serve with AmeriCorps because sometimes that privilege of financial stability is almost a requirement. We have a member benefits team that can help support. We try to make connections when we can.*

Some of the benefits and services Ampact staff connect members to include assistance with signing up for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, providing health insurance, and providing access to a Member Assistance Program (free mental health services). Ampact also provides a \$150 gear stipend for members to purchase clothing needed to work in the elements. They have also arranged for members to receive Outdoor ProLink gear discounts.

Members who complete their service term receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award of up to \$7,395. Members appreciate this benefit. One member said she would be using the education award to make a career change. She had a bachelor's degree in an unrelated field. The service term confirmed her interest in forestry and allowed her to build her resume. She planned to attend a technical college and attain an urban forestry associate degree.

## Training

This section describes the formal training provided to members both through Climate Impact Corps and the partners. Additional individual-specific training is available as well as opportunities for networking.

### Climate Impact Corps Training

Climate Impact Corps has a training pacing guide that depicts the in-person, online, and asynchronous training that is offered at the beginning and throughout the member's term for each of the four positions. All members participate in AmeriCorps-required training as well as a Climate Foundations training, designed to build proficiency in understanding and skills around climate change action and communication, which is led by the project director.

Initiative-specific training is provided by both the project director and partners including the North American Association for Environmental Education; University of Minnesota Extension; Trees and Me, LLC; Tree Trust; and the University of Minnesota Urban Forestry Outreach & Research Lab. The community stewardship facilitators training builds competencies in volunteer management, environmental education, community asset mapping, environmental action activity facilitation, and others. The sustainability project coordinators training focuses on skill building in project management, community engagement and outreach, and community asset mapping. Community forestry members training focuses on skills such as tree identification, inventorying, pruning and planting, environmental education, and volunteer management. Some of these trainings result in certifications such as identifying and managing tree pests and diseases (Minnesota tree inspector). Home energy members participate in training that provides them with industry-recognized certification.

Corps Days are held three times in a member's term when a 1.5-hour synchronous training is offered. At the beginning of the term there is a session on planning for a successful service year, midyear is service reflection, and at the end the session is on life after AmeriCorps and the Segal education award.

Members generally felt like the training was worthwhile and equipped them with important skills. They acknowledged that it must be challenging for Ampact to plan training since all of the sites had unique missions and it would not be possible to customize for each member's work experiences. For example, one member worked with Indigenous populations and would have liked training in how to interact with Indigenous members in their community, noting:

*I think the trainings that they've done are helpful, but it doesn't really translate into the service that we're doing ... I feel like there's not a lot of guidance when it comes to how, especially, like, look around the room, we don't look like the groups that we're trying to bring equity to for the most part.*

A Community Forestry member shared that because her site was different from those of other Community Forestry member placements, the trainings didn't relate and that was challenging. With the approval of Climate Impact Corps, the member was able to create a training module so that other members could collect tree seeds themselves and send them to the Forest Assisted Migration Project. The members also recognized that the Community Resilience initiative, which encompasses the community steward facilitator and sustainability coordinator positions, was fairly new and project staff had made improvements to the training from last year to this year.

### Networking

A Discord online chat has been set up by Climate Impact Corps staff that includes the members and training members. There are different channels (e.g., Forestry Channel) where members and trainers can interact and

stay connected. For example, a member may take a picture of a tree and ask for assistance in verifying its identity.

Climate Impact Corps also hosts optional monthly virtual meetups for members. Given the members are dispersed across the state, project staff said it is important to have space to check in and keep members connected. Breakout rooms are used and members can share what they are doing at their sites.

## Outcomes

This section includes information about performance measurement and evaluation, including any challenges. Program outcomes, both member and community, are described along with a discussion of the facilitators and barriers to meeting the intended outcomes.

### Performance Measurement and Evaluation

Ampact functions as the implementation arm of ServeMinnesota’s strategic initiatives and, as such, their evaluation team is responsible for conducting evaluations of Ampact programs. Ampact’s evaluation focuses both on continuous improvement and determining impact. Climate Impact Corps has continually focused on responding to community needs, which necessitates a certain amount of adaptability to the program model. Originally, the program built in adaptability by creating additional member positions (expanding from 1 to 4 positions during the first 3 years). Based on the evaluation data, the model has shifted, and in years 4–5 the program will consolidate into a single position, but use the capacity building performance measure to allow members to engage in project-based activities adaptable to their local context.

The evaluation uses multiple methods and sources and includes weekly data entry by members into a position-specific database application, member and site surveys, member and site focus groups, and ripple effects mapping—a participatory approach to look at program effects on the communities served. One year follow-up surveys with members are also planned for next year.

Program and evaluation staff identified several challenges with AmeriCorps performance measurement and evaluation requirements. The main challenge largely concerned the difficulties in measuring the impact of program activities on climate change outcomes in the span of one to two grant cycles. Specifically, with program interventions such as Community Forestry members planting trees in urban areas, the total output and climate outcomes reported for the cycle in which the planting occurred will not account for the true impacts that accrue over the span of 30-plus years. Continuing the example of tree planting in urban areas, the current feasible approach to performance measurement and evaluation may entail reporting the direct measures (e.g., number of trees planted) and estimates of immediate calculations available in the grant cycle that tree planting occurred (i.e., cumulative pounds of carbon sequestered). However, this focus on immediate outcomes neglects the reality that forestry climate solutions such as tree planting will display their impact over a long period of time.

For example, a pressing effect of climate change in urban areas known as the urban heat island effect occurs due to these areas relying on dense concentrations of pavement, buildings, and infrastructure that absorb and retain heat, leading to increased demand for energy consumption, increased air pollution, and increased illnesses related to heat. Since planting trees to increase the canopy in dense areas is a primary method to address the urban heat island effect, the program felt as though being restricted to defining the outcome of tree planting as estimates of carbon sinks provided in a year is not an accurate representation of the true outcomes that each tree will achieve as they mature long-term.

In addition to concerns with requirements to report on short-term outcomes from program activities, staff reported challenges with aligning the prescribed performance measure options to the activities of Community



Resilience programming. While it is exciting from the perspective of Aimpact to have AmeriCorps members implement sustainable practices and coordinate events to increase the connectedness of community residents to their surrounding environment, the applicable performance measures do not fully account for the activities in which members engage. Particularly the environmental output that tracks the number of individuals receiving education or training in environmental stewardship and the outcome that tracks the number of individuals with increased knowledge of environmental stewardship are narrowly defined performance measures for the activities members from the Community Resilience initiative conduct. To more accurately measure and reflect the impact of member services on Community Resilience, it would be helpful to have more options to align performance measures with the evidence-based approach Climate Impact Corps implements. One project staff explained:

*If the goal is to increase the bonds of those working together and the organizations that came to help them with the “it” [e.g., putting together a pollinator garden], then the knowledge/training performance measures don’t fit and don’t align with what the research says needs to happen, which is the social capital sense of place to move forward the goal of increasing environmental quality in communities.*

Internally, Climate Impact Corps is working to develop operational definitions for reach, scale, and effectiveness. This pursuit aligns with the program’s interest in more specific definitions and measures of the significant, impactful “indirect” activities required to achieve the goals of individual member service plans, the Climate Impact Corps, and partner organizations. These indirect activities often include tasks required to begin and maintain direct activities, such as relationship building to understand the current landscape of sustainability practices in a partner organization or developing an outreach and communications plan to effectively communicate and advertise community stewardship facilitator events to the local community residents.

With regard to AmeriCorps evaluation requirements, Climate Impact Corps is currently funded as a state formula grantee and therefore is not required to do an impact evaluation (i.e., quasi-experimental and experimental research designs). However, concerns were expressed about doing an impact evaluation for a program like Climate Impact Corps given the nature of the projects and inability to have comparison sites.

## Member Outcomes

This section describes member outcomes in the areas of civic engagement, technical skills, and career preparation.

### Civic Engagement

Both project staff and the members were asked about how participation in the Climate Impact Corps improved members’ civic engagement. Staff shared that member involvement in service with the program is a likely indicator that members already have an interest in serving communities or pursuing public-facing issues such as climate change. Although the members are reportedly often likely to be involved with community-facing service when they begin their term, through the nature of the program, many members often feel their connectedness to the community increases.

For example, members of the Community Resilience initiative become well-versed in community asset mapping and as a program staff describes, this process helps members recognize their importance and role:

*They map out the connections in the community: What relationships are already existing? What relationships can be made? Who knows who? What organization is already doing this type of work in the community? ... And they mentioned just doing that activity in the first couple months of their service made them realize how connected they already are in stuff.*



*And that really gave them some more confidence to get involved and to make those connections with the projects.*

## Technical Skills and Career Preparation

Through Climate Impact Corps' dedication to specialized training for each member position and the program model's placement of members at individual partner sites, members and staff both report considerable knowledge gains in the field of climate solutions and preparedness to pursue careers in similar job sectors. Because members are often placed at partner sites with a maximum of one to two other members, they often have the opportunity to develop relationships with staff from partner sites and thus become familiar with the responsibilities and requirements of full-time roles in a career field similar to their service focus. Similar to a job shadowing experience, exposure to careers in the green jobs sector—whether the partner organization has an explicit focus on climate solutions or not—is valuable from the perspective of staff and members to explore member career interests, obtain real-world experience, and identify required pathways to secure careers of interest (i.e., entry-level positions, further education and training).

In addition to exploring the workplace environments and responsibilities of potential career pathways, members gain access to valuable certifications and skill-building opportunities. Particularly for members participating in the Community Forestry initiative, they obtain the skills and certifications necessary for entry-level employment in forestry such as tree pruning, planting, and certification in tree identification. Salaries for entry level careers in forestry average \$38,714 – \$43,729 annually, often dependent upon skill level and private/public employer status.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, forestry members have the potential to identify and pursue niche topics in the forestry field, serving to more specifically develop technical skills and help members stand out in their future career pursuits. One member illustrated this:

*My project, the Forest Assisted Migration Project, is pretty new, but we received a \$5 million grant. It feels really good to collect hundreds of gallons of seeds and to know that that it is going to go directly to reforestation efforts. And it is just going to keep getting bigger ... and on a professional level, this job has, like, carved out a niche for me.*

Members serving under the Community Resilience initiative do not currently have a certification option, however, their experience gained through being largely responsible for organizing/facilitating community-facing events focused on local climate and influencing sustainable practices of community-based organizations and governments is a valuable entry point into career fields of this nature. Beyond the valuable community asset mapping trainings they receive, members of the Community Resilience initiative report invaluable experience with navigating an office environment, taking a new and increased level of responsibility within their partner site, and developing meaningful methods to implement evidence-based climate solutions programming and practices within local communities. One member shared, "I can't imagine working for anything else other than to support climate work. It [my AmeriCorps service experience] has affected me greatly in that I love going to work every day. And I feel like I am contributing to a very just cause."

Another community stewardship facilitator member explained how their particular position and member experience greatly impacted their future career pursuits:

*When I started this job I realized that change does not start from a global [level]. It starts—not nationally, not [at the] state—but in your backyard, like in a neighborhood. I think of the Amazon burning down and ocean levels rising—just climate change in general, but these*

<sup>3</sup> Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development's [Forest and Conservation Workers Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics](#); ZipRecruiter's [Forestry salary in Minnesota](#).

*things happen and can be changed from a really small level. When I became exposed to the networks of nonprofits in Minnesota that are all working together and realized that there truly is a fire hose of financial support to greater Minnesota from legislation; [it is like] somebody said, a climate haven ... . There is a lot to enjoy about this work. I can't imagine working for anything else other than to support climate work.*

In addition to verbal interest in pursuing a career in a related field of service, program staff have efforts in place to track the career preparation and attainment of Climate Impact Corps members. Namely, the program's member survey recently reported in the 2022–23 Annual Evaluation Report that “85 percent of the members either agreed or strongly agreed that their role was supportive of their career goals and similarly, 85 percent of members said they had an intention to work or pursue further training in the climate field.” To follow up on the career outcomes of members following their service, the program will administer a 1-year follow-up survey to gather information on their individual career/education outcomes. Additionally, program staff aim to supplement this information with available position descriptions/titles from member LinkedIn accounts.

## Community Outcomes

Climate Impact Corps improves community outcomes through increased energy efficiency, access to healthy forestry in urban areas, connectedness of residents to the natural environment surrounding communities served, and increased resident knowledge of local climate change effects and solutions. Continuing the case study's interest in interventions designed to promote Community Resilience, this section will focus on outcomes from projects the community stewardship facilitators implement in the communities they serve to contribute to a more informed, connected, and thereby resilient community.

According to staff and Community Resilience initiative members, the primary outcome for communities served by partner sites is increased connections. Increased connections as a community outcome refers to two major types of connection: 1) community residents connecting to the physical spaces they live in and recognizing links to individual/community behaviors and local climate change effects/solutions and 2) developing or strengthening connections among local organizations to collectively address climate change in a way that utilizes the assets of a local community. One member explained the services they provide:

*They provide a capacity to these [partners] that just don't have that [for community connections]. And [for] a local municipality there was just so much I was able to do for them in terms of engaging with schools and outreach to residents that they wouldn't have time carved out to do that work [because] their day-to-day operations take up all their time.*

Additionally, members focused on building sustainable, resilient communities have the opportunity to integrate residents from their local communities that have been historically disenfranchised. Using their community asset map training, members are equipped to consider all points of strengths and needs in their local community, such as members or institutions in the community that can add a lens of equity when developing and implementing climate solutions. For example, program staff described how one member identified the need for more sustainable programming dedicated toward historically disadvantaged communities, explaining:

*In [community], [member] did some work in a park that was in a primarily Black, low-income neighborhood [and] the park has been under-resourced and not kept up to the same extent as other places in the city. So [member] worked with their sustainability contact or maybe parks contact in the city to revitalize that area a little bit and clean it up and add some new stuff to the park.*

## Barriers to Meeting Intended Outcomes

When asked about barriers to meeting their intended program outcomes, project staff discussed the difficulty of onboarding many new partner sites. While project staff acknowledged the importance of increasing their reach and service to communities across Minnesota, it can be difficult to communicate the logistics and requirements of AmeriCorps-funded service to many new partners at once. For example, project staff explained:

*There's particular tension a lot of times with local equity-focused community nonprofits around advocacy and learning where that line is when members can't participate. Because we'll have sites that are [community-based organizations in Minneapolis] but when there's so much activity in Minneapolis as a response to the George Floyd protests, that organization sees itself as a justice organization and wants to be involved in that. So how do we communicate to the site that the member can't engage in that during site time and some of [the things like] that?*

Additionally, project staff and members alike explained frustrations with AmeriCorps requirements, noting that climate change affects every facet of society and requires all of society to problem solve and implement solutions (e.g., nonprofits, government agencies, for-profit businesses). This can be challenging in light of AmeriCorps regulations and restrictions on AmeriCorps-funded projects to not benefit businesses. There are times when the local needs, as defined by the partners, will benefit small businesses and this can be frustrating to the partners that “the system doesn't get it.” A project staff said:

*There's no national framework that we can base our work on. Now we have a state framework ... . And you know climate is political. ... And also climate solutions often are very close to the line, like on AmeriCorps compliance. We really have to constantly be scrutinizing things related to, like, advocacy, applying for grant funding, the benefits of business ... . There are projects that I really wish our members could be doing and organizations that I wish they could be engaging in and they just can't because of some of those really strong compliance issues ... last year we had some members working with some rural grocery stores and that had to be stopped because ... technically [they] were for profit, even though this function they're serving in their community is really such a critical ... food justice kind of a thing.*

## Facilitators to Meeting Intended Outcomes

While the recent influx of new partnerships was listed as a barrier in the section above, project staff and members frequently mentioned the effectiveness of strong relationships with partner organizations in achieving the goals and missions of Climate Impact Corps. Beyond the partner sites' presence in communities across Minnesota providing a space for members to complete service activities, partners are vital to a successful member experience and by extension, more resilient community. Namely, a partner site engaged in the success of their member(s) can provide invaluable training and real-world experiences for members as they navigate implementing feasible local climate solutions in their current and future communities. One project staff explained:

*I think a lot of the bedrock of what we can be successful on relies a lot on our sites. We rely on a lot of our sites, because that's where the members are getting the local experience. We provide the supports we can to the sites that help them with the uniqueness that comes with hosting an AmeriCorps member. They're not on staff but they're not an unpaid volunteer. That site partnership and relationship is really important, so that's something we try to prioritize as [staff managers]. Because we know it means a lot to the member*

*experience if they have a really supportive site supervisor that can mentor them through that experience.*

From a programmatic perspective, project staff shared similar sentiments regarding their strong relationship with ServeMinnesota. According to project staff, the support from their state service commission is valuable because:

*It gives a little bit of wiggle room to try new things, to feel like you can be innovative and take some risks. Because climate work is so new and there's so much innovation happening across the entire field, there is an element of needing to take risks and try things. Having that support has been huge.*

## Closing

In response to higher temperatures, extreme weather, flooding, and changes in the Minnesota ecosystem, the Climate Impact Corps seeks to implement climate solutions that promote change at a local level. A major component of this goal materializes through the service of members placed at partner sites across the state, regardless of population size or demography. Climate Impact Corps has also strategically aligned its initiatives with the priorities of the Minnesota Climate Action Framework, the state's plan to address and prepare for climate change and is building the organizational capacity of the partner sites around those priorities (e.g., resilient communities, clean energy, and efficient buildings.)

During the 2-day site visit and analysis of member, project staff, partner, and community interview responses, researchers gathered valuable insights into the structures and supports the Climate Impact Corps offers members and, by extension, partner organizations with similar goals toward climate awareness and solutions. Through their approach to developing the capabilities of members to identify the available and needed assets of particular communities, members are adequately equipped to support partner organizations in a wide variety of service needs.

Members of the Climate Impact Corps and specifically the Community Resilience initiative serve as an invaluable resource to implement flexible, community-engaged solutions to the localized effects of climate change. Recognized by interviewed partner staff and project staff alike, the ability of members to identify the specific climate priorities of the communities they serve is essential to both the sustainability of implemented solutions *and* behavioral willingness of community residents to engage with climate solutions at all.



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### About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. Learn more at [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov).

### About the Office of Research and Evaluation

The [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation](#) assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America.

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### Photo Credit

AmeriCorps and Ampact Climate Impact Corps

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ICF

1902 Reston Metro Plaza, Reston, VA 20190

Phone: 703-934-3603 or 1-800-532-4783

Fax: 703-934-3740 Email: [info@icf.com](mailto:info@icf.com)



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