



Evaluation of Habitat for Humanity AmeriCorps Program 2016-2019

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Habitat AmeriCorps Program Evaluation

Executive Summary

Evaluation Overview

The following report presents findings of an external evaluation for Habitat for Humanity's AmeriCorps program from program years 2016-2018. The focus of the evaluation was to determine whether hosting AmeriCorps National and VISTA members expanded local Habitat for Humanity organizations' capacity to serve communities across the United States. The current evaluation report includes survey findings from three stakeholder groups: (1) Habitat host sites (local Habitats that host AmeriCorps members) as well as a matched comparison group of local Habitat organizations that do not host AmeriCorps members; (2) National and VISTA members placed at Habitat host sites during 2017-2018; and (3) National and VISTA alumni who served with a Habitat for Humanity host site prior to 2017. It also includes in-depth qualitative case studies of both a Habitat host site with a large budget and one with a small budget to illustrate the ways Habitat AmeriCorps members add capacity in both unique contexts. This mixed-methods approach examines the capacity and value that the Habitat AmeriCorps program adds from three unique perspectives:

Capacity gained by **local Habitat organizations** who host Habitat AmeriCorps members

Value gained by **Habitat AmeriCorps members** in knowledge and experience

Importance of Habitat AmeriCorps in the career trajectory of **alumni**

Habitat AmeriCorps Members Increase the Capacity of Host Sites to Build Homes and Engage Volunteers

Local Habitat organizations that hosted National and VISTA members were matched to similar sized Habitats that did not host members. Host sites both built and rehabbed more homes compared to similar-sized non-hosting local Habitats. Over the 2017-18 fiscal year, host sites built an average of 9.3 homes and non-hosting Habitats built an average of 3.25 homes and only host sites saw an increase in homes built over the 3 yrs.¹

Host sites engaged a significantly larger number of volunteers compared to non-host Habitats. In sum, the quasi-experimental matched-pair design showed, over a three-year period, that by hosting National and VISTA members, Habitat organizations increased builds, rehabs, and volunteers. These increases, in turn, contributed to the housing stability of community members throughout the U.S.

¹ Information about methods and statistical analyses contained in the body of the report

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Habitat AmeriCorps Members Gain Valuable Skills, Which Many Utilize in the Community Development Field

All Alumni reported gaining important knowledge and experience as part of their work, including an understanding of solutions to community problems (82%); homebuilding experience (76%); and leadership skills (65%). Compared to when they began, at the end of the service year, National and VISTA members reported being significantly more interested in affordable housing development. In addition, 72% felt that the service year positively contributed to their prospects of finding a job in the future.

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Introduction

Background

Habitat for Humanity's (HFH) participation in the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) AmeriCorps program has been touted as a model for connecting volunteering, civic engagement, and homeownership. Habitat for Humanity is the largest faith-based home-building program in the world, impacting families that include veterans, those impacted by disasters, people with disabilities, migrants, and the diverse American workforce at large.

Studies indicate that the Habitat AmeriCorps program in general holds promise for addressing gaps in civic engagement within the U.S.² A previous evaluation of the Habitat AmeriCorps program demonstrated that service members increased the capacity of host sites to build more new homes, rehab more homes, and engage more volunteers than comparable local Habitat organizations who did not utilize any service members.³ The current evaluation replicates the previous study about the ways in which AmeriCorps members add value and capacity to organizations, and expands upon it by looking in-depth at two local Habitat organizations, from very different contexts, that host members to more fully uncover the ways in which the service year contributes to how the organizations function.

Mixed-methods designs often have the rigor and credibility of quantitative designs and analysis, as well as the richness of qualitative approaches, and are valuable for understanding the impact of volunteering and civic engagement.⁴ The current evaluation utilizes a mixed-method approach, including a quasi-experimental design that compares organization-level outcomes between host sites and comparable (matched) local Habitat organizations who do not host AmeriCorps members.

To better understand the rationale for this study's multiple samples and research questions, it is helpful to understand some theory about volunteering and service. National service is believed to have at least four essential outcomes for participating members: civic engagement, personal growth, social capital, and public work. AmeriCorps members typically have higher rates of future volunteerism, education attainment, social capital and life skills than other citizens.⁵

² Finlay, A. K., Flanagan, C., & Wray-Lake, L. (2011). *Civic engagement patterns and transitions over 8 years: The AmeriCorps National Study*. *Developmental Psychology*, *47*, 1728-1743.

³ See, Olson, Cooper, and Viola (2016). *Evaluation of HFH National Service Program 2013-2016*.

⁴ Frumkin, P. & Miller, B. (2008). *Visions of National Service*. *Sociology*, *45*, 436-443.

⁵ Frumkin, P. & Jastrzab, J. (2010). *Serving Country and Community: Who Benefits from National Service*. Harvard University Press; Simon, C.A., & Wang, C. (2002). *The Impact of AmeriCorps service on volunteer Participants*. *Administration and Society*, *34*, 522-540.; Tschirhart et al. (2001).

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In the current evaluation, civic engagement and personal growth among AmeriCorps members might be demonstrated by the extent to which service impacts members': a) desires to contribute more to the nation and the communities in which they work and b) individual growth in skills and knowledge. Social capital is the extent to which AmeriCorps members, local Habitats, and the community build greater strength through their interpersonal connections. Working for the public good may reflect the capacity of the collective labor to impact the work of the local Habitat organization and community members being served. Other evaluation studies have focused on social psychological variables tied to volunteer cohesion, connectedness, and sense of community.⁶

Habitat for Humanity operates under a federated model with Habitat for Humanity International (HFHI) providing centralized governance to independent, local Habitat organizations, who coordinate all aspects of Habitat home building in their local areas. With more than 1,200 U.S. based local Habitat organizations, HFH provides low-income families living in substandard housing with volunteer-built, rehabilitated or repaired homes and affordable mortgage products. Local Habitat organizations are located in both rural and urban communities and target those communities' most vulnerable populations. The primary selection criteria used to identify homeowner families is economic need. The families have low incomes (usually 25% to 60% of area median income), live in sub-standard or overcrowded housing, or devote a high percentage of their income to housing costs. They must also demonstrate the ability to repay the no interest mortgages (for new construction) or loans (for repairs), and a willingness to partner with HFH to participate in financial literacy training and to volunteer to help construct their home and the homes of others, known as "sweat equity".

To evaluate the effectiveness of the AmeriCorps-HFHI relationship it is important to survey leaders at local Habitat organizations who recruit, train, support, and guide future goals of AmeriCorps members,⁷ and to survey the individual members (current members and alumni) themselves, seeing how their service and their experiences have personally impacted the life course and professional trajectory of these members.⁸ The AmeriCorps program presents a model of service as a pathway to employment. The model suggests that direct benefits, such as increased social and human capital, lead to strong career connections and increased perceptions of job-ready skills and personal qualities. Initial findings indicate that AmeriCorps members believe their service experience will help them find a job, improve their job performance, get a promotion, and make successful career steps.⁹ The current evaluation expands previous findings showing that organizations who host AmeriCorps members, when compared with comparable local Habitats who don't, report increased

⁶ See, Olson, Cooper, and Viola (2016). *Evaluation of HFH National Service Program 2013-2016*.

⁷ Allen, J. A. & Mueller, S.L. (2013). *The revolving door: A closer look at major factors in volunteers' intention to quit*. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 41, 139-155.

⁸ Jenkinson, C.E., Dickens, A.P.I, Jones, K., Thompson-Coon, J., Taylor, R.S., et al. (2013). *Is volunteering a public health intervention? A systematic review and meta-analysis of the health and survival of volunteers*. *BMC Public Health*, 13, 1-10.

⁹ CNCS (2013). *Research and Evaluation Symposium*. Retrieved from http://americorps2013.hb-co.com/presentations/Research_Summit/Research_Summit_Slides.pdf

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capacity to build and rehab homes, and engage volunteers. Furthermore, the evaluation returns to the question of capacity using a similar quasi-experimental design methodology, in addition to qualitative data and in-depth case studies of two local Habitats who host AmeriCorps members.

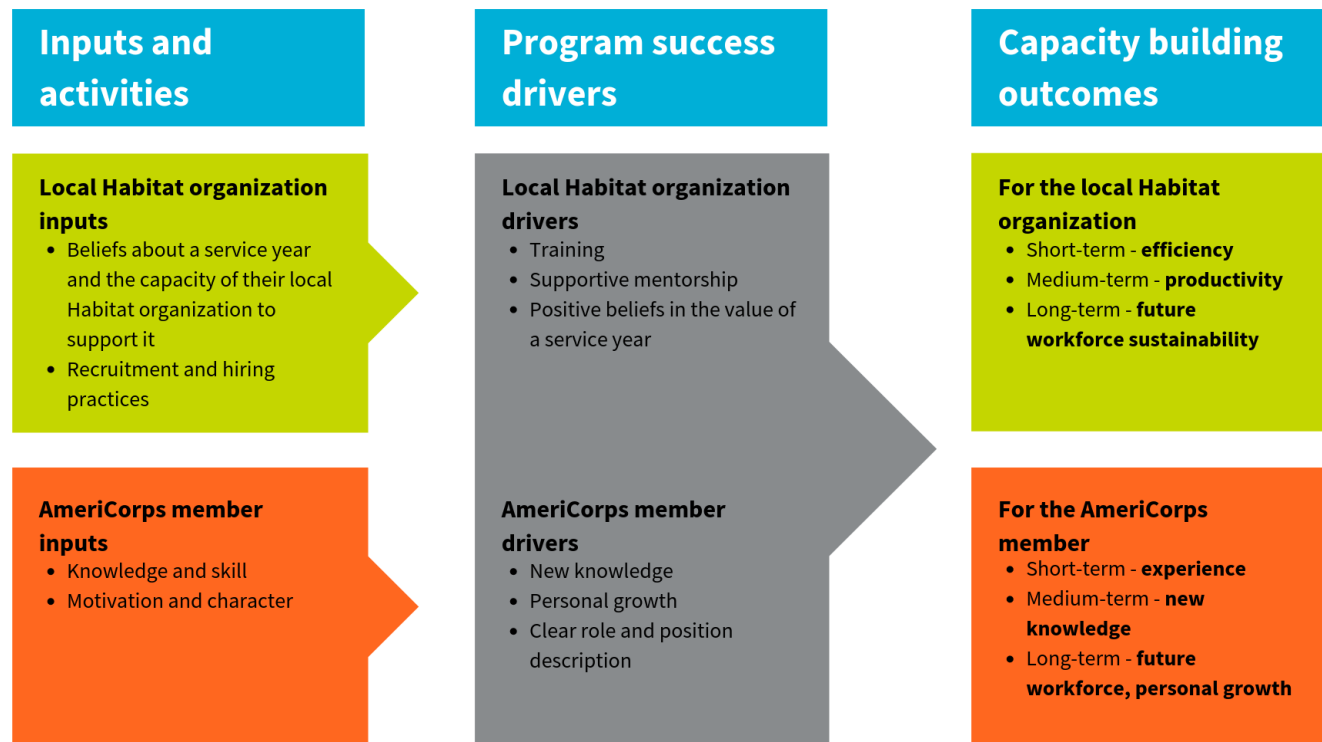
Program Overview

Since 1994, Habitat for Humanity (HFH) has partnered with its local Habitat organizations to invest in, and place, AmeriCorps members in communities throughout the United States. Habitat for Humanity utilizes AmeriCorps members as a means of addressing the need for affordable housing by engaging volunteers and community members, developing resources and supporting families. These interventions, in theory, result in local Habitat organizations gaining capacity, developing sustainable infrastructure, increasing the number of families served, and increasing the ability to serve families more comprehensively. This ultimately leads to changes in family and neighborhood quality of life.

AmeriCorps members provide host sites a unique human resource: motivated, passionate, hard-working members who can help host sites meet their goals and address community needs in a variety of ways. Members engage directly with volunteers, homeowner families, and other stakeholders within the community. Through their service year with Habitat, members also have the opportunity for personal development and skill improvement. The positions AmeriCorps National members take or the roles they play within Habitat are adapted to the needs of the host site with the goal of expanding the host site's ability to meet community needs through direct service. AmeriCorps VISTA members perform more indirect service, building capacity and sustainable solutions. VISTA members strengthen capacity by building programs and infrastructure, expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, and coordinating trainings. Activities directly relate to the VISTA program's stated mission of eliminating poverty through community awareness and involvement.

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Logic Model



Evaluation Model

The purpose of this evaluation was to conduct a rigorous, independent assessment of Habitat for Humanity's AmeriCorps program. The primary objective was to determine, through a matched-pair, quasi-experimental design, whether there was evidence that Habitat host sites (through the participation of AmeriCorps members) showed greater productivity and increased capacity compared to similar, non-hosting Habitats. Research questions, similar to the previous evaluation from 2013-2016, included the following:

- Do AmeriCorps members increase HFH host sites' capacity to:
 - Serve more families?
 - Engage more volunteers?
 - Offer housing-related services, including new builds and rehabs?
- Do AmeriCorps members benefit from their year of service by:
 - Receiving useful workforce development training?
 - Learning new and transferrable skills?
 - Experiencing an increase in civic engagement?

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These questions and more were answered through multiple survey measures. The different surveys, each designed for this evaluation, were given to three separate samples (local Habitat organizations, current Habitat AmeriCorps members, and alumni).

1. *Local Habitat Survey:* The external evaluators interviewed the HFHI Long-term Volunteer program department's extended leadership team as well as staff from three local Habitat organizations in order to ensure that the survey questions covered the range of topics of interest for the evaluation. The survey of local Habitats was collected in the fall of 2018 and examined the difference between local Habitat organizations that utilize AmeriCorps members (host sites) and those that do not (non-host sites). Habitat organizations from each group were paired on budget size, creating a matched, quasi-experimental study. Outcome data included variables related to key organizational goals such as the number of families served, homes built, houses rehabbed, partnerships created, and resources generated.
2. *Host site surveys:* Host site leadership and/or direct supervisors of AmeriCorps members received additional survey items related to the impact members had on organization-level outcomes and added capacity.
3. *Survey of AmeriCorps members and alumni:* As stated earlier, a primary goal of the Habitat AmeriCorps program evaluation is to assess the extent to which the program is cultivating life-long housing and community development leaders. Thus, the second component of the study utilized pre-post survey data collected from currently serving AmeriCorps members and a one-time alumni survey (two similar yet unique instruments) to better understand their experiences and what impact serving with HFH has had on them. In collaboration with the HFH team, evaluators collected online surveys from alumni (September 2018) and current members (August 2017 and August 2018).

These surveys were designed to answer the following questions:

- What impact has service with AmeriCorps and Habitat for Humanity had on individuals' perceived life plans?
- Do AmeriCorps members plan to continue to work on housing issues following their service year?
- Have AmeriCorps alumni continued to work on housing issues?
- What perceptions do members/alumni have about their contribution to organizational capacity?
- What perceptions do members/alumni have about improved quality of life of Habitat service recipients?

Beyond the quantitative data sets there were multiple sources of qualitative data, including both short answer questions from survey monkey, and more in-depth, in-person case studies of one large host site (Habitat for

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Humanity of Seattle King County) and one smaller local Habitat organization (Habitat for Humanity of Seminole County and Greater Apopka). Part of the rationale for this case study was the finding in past years that larger host sites tended to make use of the Habitat AmeriCorps program. Plus, it was found that some small local Habitats did not feel they had the staff (and other resources) to manage members and fully take advantage of the Habitat AmeriCorps program. The goal of the case studies was therefore to qualitatively examine a small vs. a large budget host site.

Both the city of Seattle and Seminole County have unique economies with significant housing and labor challenges. Both are growing, sprawling areas making them more difficult places for working adults to own a home and, for Habitat, more complicated places to build. The first concern heard, when considering applying for the AmeriCorps program was, “who will manage this person?” Some reluctant local Habitat organizations are worried about the bureaucracy. We heard consistently from host sites that the application process is not very cumbersome. Those in Seminole believed that with the right mindset—the right mission-focus and the buy-in, the effort will pay off. They further argued that those who do not apply are “missing the boat” when they do not apply. And that “outreach and training is difficult, but with the right hire, all goes well.”

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Finding 1: Habitat AmeriCorps Members Increase the Capacity of Host Sites to Serve More Families by Building and Rehabbing More Homes

Key Quantitative Findings Related to Building Capacity

Local Habitat organizations that hosted National and VISTA members across 2016-2018 were matched to similar sized Habitat organizations that did not host members to compare outcomes related to building and rehabbing homes. *Findings show that host sites both built and rehabbed more homes compared to similar-sized non-hosting Habitats.*^{10 11 12} Over the 2017-18 fiscal year, host sites built an average of 9.3 homes and non-hosting Habitats built an average of 3.25 homes and only host sites saw an increase in homes built over the 3 yrs.¹³

The most rigorous aspect of the current evaluation demonstrates that whether a large or small local Habitat organization, utilizing AmeriCorps members adds capacity to accomplish the core mission of local Habitats to complete more home projects. Surveys with AmeriCorps members, shown in Figure 1 below, provide further evidence for this finding as well. Approximately two-thirds of host sites report strong agreement that National members have helped expand overall capacity to build homes, and the pace at which homes are built. These findings are strongest for National members, which is as expected, given that VISTA members play stronger roles in organizational functions outside of home building.

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test with a dependent variable of total homes built across Small vs. Large local Habitats showed similar impact on builds regardless of size: Small hosts built an average of 2.6 homes annually vs. small non-hosts which built 2.3 homes. Large hosts built and average of 9.3 homes annually vs. large non-hosts which built 8.2 homes. In other words, host sites built 13% more homes per year than non-hosts regardless of the size of the organization across the three-year period.

A similar analysis was completed exploring the impact of size and hosting AmeriCorps members on the average number of rehabs. An ANOVA with rehabs as the dependent variable was statistically significant such

¹⁰ Host sites were randomly matched (in cases when there was more than one potential match) with similar non-host local Habitats on their annual expense budget. When this matching process was tested to see if the groups were different on the number of staff or part time staff, as expected, the two groups were statistically equivalent. This was true on comparisons of several other variables as well. Given that budget was the most appropriate variable to equalize the two groups, cross-sectional comparisons (baseline) were made between the host and non-host conditions. Three One-tailed paired t-tests, compared host and non-hosts (matched on expense budgets). The first t-test compared the total number of builds across 2016, 2017, and 2018. The second analysis was run on the total number of rehabs across 2016, 2017, and 2018.

¹¹ Host builds of $m=20.36$ and non-host builds of $m=15.37$; $p<.10$

¹² Host rehabs of $m=15.35$ and non-host rehabs of $m=7.11$; $p<.05$

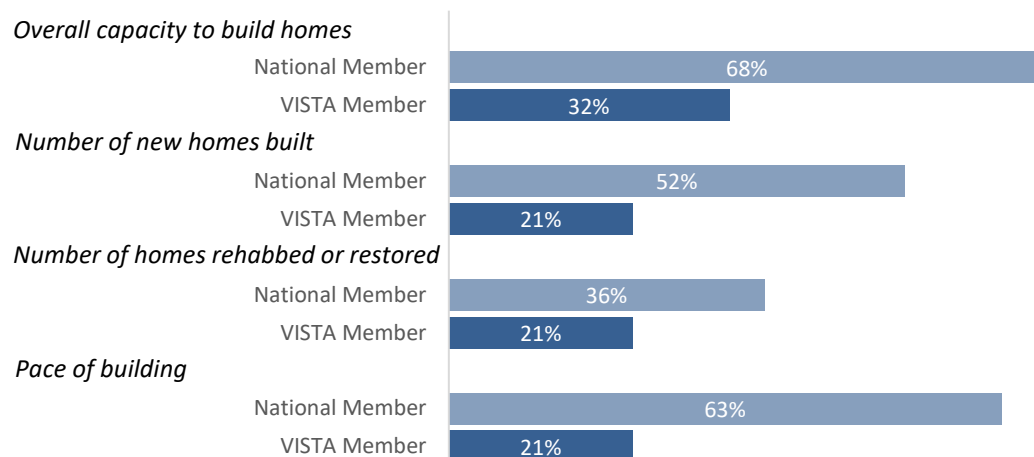
¹³ Hosts increased from a mean of 4.44 to 5.96, $p<.05$; and the non-host Habitat organizations saw no significant change from 4.05 to 4.32

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that small host sites experienced a greater impact of hosting AmeriCorps than did large host sites. Small hosts rehabbed an average of 3.4 homes versus small non-hosts that rehabbed 1.3 homes whereas large hosts rehabbed 5.8 and large non-hosts rehabbed an average of 3.9 homes. In other words, small hosts saw a significantly greater difference in rehabs (162% more) than did large hosts (49% more).

1. Host Sites Perceive AmeriCorps Members Add Building Capacity

Percent Strong Agreement that National and VISTA Members increased:



Key Qualitative Findings Related to Building Capacity

Qualitatively, there is additional evidence that Habitat AmeriCorps Members improve host site capacity. The most comprehensive illustration of this was shown in case studies with two very different host sites. According to administrative staff of Habitat for Humanity of Seattle King County, they could only build at such a large scale with the presence of AmeriCorps members. Key organizational staff members reported, quite simply, that “we couldn’t exist the way we do if we didn’t have them,” and “we could hardly handle any one at our sites if they closed the AmeriCorps program.” Another administrator said their “portfolio [builds, rehabs, repairs] was 100% the result of National members.”

The Seminole County HFH pointed out that the AmeriCorps program is cost-effective, and that they were able to double the number of builds that they would have been able to do without AmeriCorps members. AmeriCorps members increase the speed of building, which saves money, and this building capacity has increased annually. Because of member presence, the Seminole County HFH was able to service 22

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additional families, by their estimation. Another theme which emerged was that members bring in not only an extra set of hands, but new energy and new ideas, which resulted in securing a new capacity building grant. Put simply, without members, host site leaders said they would need to cut the number of families served.

The qualitative short answers from the local Habitat organization surveys were also congruent with the case study interviews. Below are additional themes and quotes related to host site capacity to work on more homes (whether new builds, rehabs or repairs).

- “Members increased capacity (more homes built) in less time.”
- “We are able to work in more locations at once with support of AmeriCorps.”
- “Our AmeriCorps provide us a consistent source of construction labor and onsite volunteer leadership. It would be impossible to build as many homes as we do each year without their help.”
- “They allow us to build more homes, in turn serve more families, and by being stewards and advocates for our mission on and off site, they recruit more regular volunteers that will continue their service well beyond their 10.5 months... We love them!”
- “The AmeriCorps members' biggest impact has been in the construction capacity area. Without AmeriCorps members the construction team would not have been able to maintain the capacity that they were doing.”
- “Without them, we simply would not be able to do the work we currently do.”
- “National members add value by increasing our sustainability, speed, quality, mission, and volunteer oversight.”
- “They allow the affiliate [us] to engage more volunteers with greater customer service, thus engaging more people as advocates and ultimately building/repairing more homes and serving more families.”
- “Though we did not increase the number of homes built this year, our [AmeriCorps National] member was able to help us ramp up to building 5 per year in the next 5 years through her architecture background.”

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Finding 2: AmeriCorps Members Increase Host Site Capacity to Serve More Families by Engaging More Volunteers

Key Quantitative Findings

Host sites also engaged a greater number of volunteers, on average, compared to non-hosts.^{14 15} In sum, the quasi-experimental matched-pair design showed that local Habitats which hosted AmeriCorps members increased their capacity to engage volunteers, which, in turn, is critical for both the pace of building homes but also for engaging communities. Volunteers are often a direct link to the communities in which a local Habitat contributes. They can be instrumental in expanding the footprint of a local Habitat beyond homeowners to include a range of constituents that include community residents, additional future volunteers, as well as donors.

2. Host Sites Perceive AmeriCorps National and VISTA Members Add Capacity in Multiple Ways

Percent Strong Agreement that National and VISTA Members Increased:

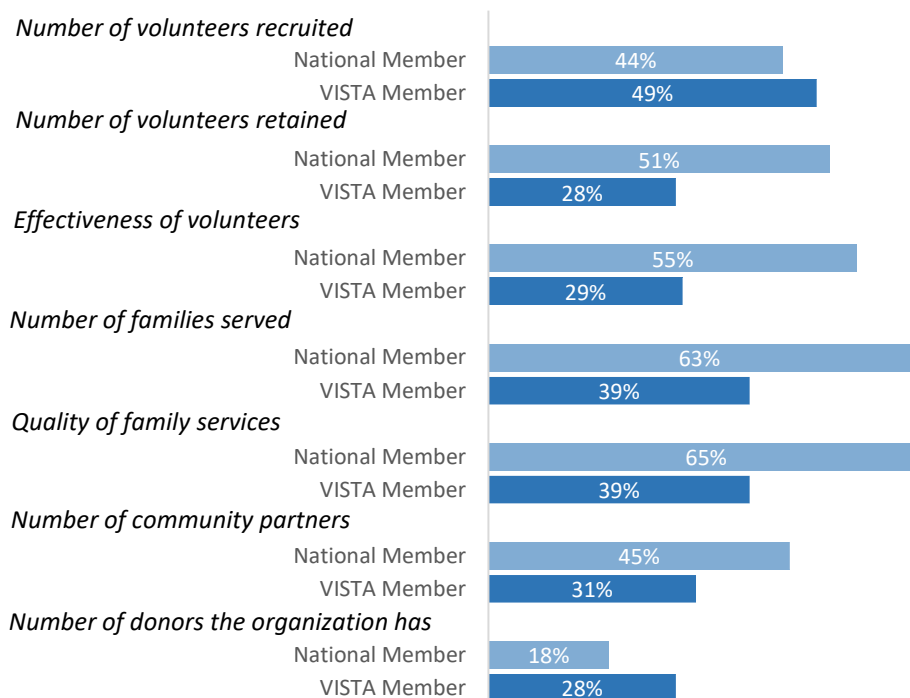


Figure 2 illustrates that nearly two-thirds of host sites strongly agree that AmeriCorps Members increase the

¹⁴ A third t-test was run on the number of volunteers engaged. In each of these cases, it was predicted that the host site group would have significantly greater totals than the matched non-hosting local Habitat organizations (N=59 per group).

¹⁵ Matched hosts engaged more volunteers $m=1,499$ than non-hosts $m=1,436$; $p<.001$.

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number of families served, as well as the quality of service. Approximately half of host sites report that VISTA members are strongly effective at helping recruit volunteers. These two sets of findings indicate that Habitat AmeriCorps members play an important role in expanding the volunteer footprint and effectively serving families.

Key Qualitative Findings

Volunteers give vital spare time and are a substantial force necessary for builds. Qualitative and case study data provides more nuanced understanding of how Habitat AmeriCorps members help build a host site's capacity to engage volunteers. Both National and VISTA members play different, yet critical roles in the volunteer engagement process. VISTA members create volunteer management systems, whereas National members help manage and motivate volunteers. National members often manage volunteers who sometimes require significant attention and care to do their work well. Members work daily, full-time, and know precisely what tasks volunteers can help with. They possess relevant knowledge and skills and bring about more quality outcomes. They often have energy, passion, and excitement for the work, which can keep things fun and exciting for volunteers, which also keeps them coming back on a regular basis.

Given the consistency of engagement, they can tailor the volunteer experience to the specific motivations of individual volunteers, while teaching valuable aspects of home building and repair. The regular engagement also helps in identifying volunteer-assets that could be utilized to make the most efficient home building impacts. In total, these aspects help ensure volunteers remained energized and engaged in the work. They often feel part of a team and community.

National members tend to be in the field more than the office. They are often the first "touch point" for families, but they bring a strong sense of community to the volunteers, and they provide consistency in the role of volunteer coordinator where it is valuable having a consistent point of contact. Volunteer Coordinators require strong people skills. When they are trained and become effective in the role, they tend to find the reward to be great.

As one local Habitat organization pointed out, "Our main focus for AmeriCorps was to get a volunteer group up and running. Before, people kind of came and approached us [to volunteer], and then we had a more organized way to deal with volunteers, and volunteer set up and the program helped us improve our reputation." Without AmeriCorps members, outreach to the community would wane. Staff felt that AmeriCorps members are good at mobilizing young people and have their own contacts throughout the community. In Seminole County, members, serving as volunteer coordinators, helped obtain an influx of volunteers, the most reliable set coming from the two Catholic churches, and from local businesses--Coca Cola, Chase, and Rollins College.

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Case studies also revealed that members' work with volunteers was said to help the local Habitat organization's reputation. One director of a host site said that a member, due to getting a volunteer program up and running, expanded the host site's reputation, leading them to bring her on as permanent staff. Members help host sites build new relationships and increase visibility in a neighborhood. Good members have become a positive voice out in the community. They have been interested in educating public, private and government representatives to promote the work of the local Habitat organization as well as Habitat for Humanity International

A common theme that surveys uncovered from local Habitat staff was that the Habitat AmeriCorps program brought about noticeable improvements in the quality and quantity of volunteer engagement. The following quotes illustrate the impact that AmeriCorps members had with respect to leveraging volunteers.

- “The position where our AmeriCorps National members really shine is in the Volunteer Management Assistant position. This member helps us to recruit, schedule, train, and retain a large percentage of the 13,000-15,000 volunteers who engage with our mission annually.”
- “Our AmeriCorps members have made a lasting impact in our volunteer program and Family Services in our community.”
- “AmeriCorps National members allow for increased volunteer capacity and volunteer retention, which supports our building efforts and financial goals, allowing for more homes to be built in a shorter amount of time, resulting in more families and individuals being served.”

Quantitative data may not always capture the true depth of impact that programs have, especially when efforts involve aspects of community-building. It is clear from case study interviews with staff, homeowners, volunteers, and other stakeholders, that National and VISTA members create meaningful connections with homeowner families and volunteers. Members often provide a sense of youthful optimism and openness to mentorship that senior staff and volunteers value. Regular volunteers and construction staff love the social interaction with AmeriCorps members. Several retirees, in fact, cited the AmeriCorps members as the reason they keep coming back as regulars. Critical roles and tasks include volunteer coordination, developing classes for families, helping to translate materials into Spanish, reviewing Neighborhood Revitalization applications, coordinating applications for service, or helping develop classes for community residents. There are numerous ways that Habitat AmeriCorps increase the capacity of host sites to successfully engage with multiple stakeholders.

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Finding 3: AmeriCorps Members Enhance Organizational Function in Numerous Additional Ways

Key Qualitative Findings

Qualitative survey questions and in-depth case studies of host sites demonstrated that there are many different forms of impact that National and VISTA members bring. Aside from increased efficiency and capacity to complete projects and serve more families, National and VISTA members often play pivotal roles in bringing energy, creativity, and new ideas to the organization. One of the most commonly mentioned themes, displayed in Figure 3 below, is that members often help host sites create new programs, processes and systems that ultimately expand the reach and performance of a local Habitat organization.

3. National and VISTA Members Describe Multiple Forms of Capacity Added to Organization (frequency of response)



Habitat AmeriCorps members identified numerous ways that they expanded the capacity of host sites. The most commonly mentioned response from the members themselves was that they had added capacity by helping start a new program, organizational system or process, or plan. Some concrete examples of innovation and new system and programmatic thinking include the following creations:

- Homebuyer education curriculum for the children of homeowner families
- Sustainable education curriculum for the children of homeowner families

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- Social media plan
- Videos for training and recruiting volunteers
- An ambassador program for volunteers to participate in outreach, fundraising, and education

The notion that Habitat AmeriCorps members bring a fresh perspective, energy, and creativity was also mirrored in responses from host sites. Examples and quotes from members about these themes include the following:

- Going beyond the usual weekend model and utilizing weekday options for individual volunteers.
- Bringing more consistent volunteers rather than the one-offs.
- Reaching out to former homeowners to bring them back into the fold with new and refresher classes, and then utilizing those homeowners to help, through word-of-mouth, to recruit new families.
- Recognizing the volunteers in new ways, such as throwing a volunteer appreciation party and making it fun. One example included a celebration with over 130 people and ended up being a significant event to stimulate re-engagement with Habitat.
- Getting routine individuals out more [to volunteer], two really good guys we could not build without. Now our local Habitat has 8 of them.
- Opening up more sections of the website.
- Providing a fresh perspective and staff welcoming new ideas and fresh ways to effectively run our programs. Secondly, members come from a place of compassion and drive to work for the mission of Habitat.
- AmeriCorps National members are an injection of help and positive energy at the local Habitat.
- Showing energy and passion for the mission.
- Taking on big idea projects that our paid staff cannot fit into the day, big ideas that help the host site move forward.

Much of the above areas focus on the AmeriCorps National Program. National members play critical roles in the homebuilding process and are very deeply involved with volunteers. This is the nature of the specific roles, which places them on the front lines of a local Habitat's work doing direct service in communities. VISTA members, while not engaged in building related work, nonetheless contribute to organizational capacity in unique and valuable ways. A total of 51 host sites who utilize VISTA members provided detailed descriptions of how this group adds unique value and capacity to host sites. Qualitative responses, displayed in Table 1, included four distinct categories of value, including: *fundraising, community engagement, program development and systems improvement*. Most notable of these categories is the latter two, in which host sites provided extensive examples of how VISTA members worked to develop a new program that may have allowed the host site to reach a new stakeholder group, or how they improved systems in ways that improved efficiency. In many cases, VISTA members may mean the difference between a local Habitat simply

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maintaining the status quo of their operations and innovating, adapting, and growing as an organization.

Table 1. Value Added by VISTA Members

Area	Examples From Host Sites
Fundraising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “VISTAs add value by increasing our donations, increasing the output of information and resources to our families and donors.” • “Better understanding of programs available to us, more capacity for fundraising”
Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We were able to increase our presence in the communities we serve” • “Our VISTA Member allowed us to maintain a regular presence in our Neighborhood Revitalization Target area”
Program Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We had one VISTA develop an Outcome Survey for homeowners, which was a 6-year study that provided information about homeowners’ lives following a Habitat home purchase, as well as information about the effects of Habitat presence in a neighborhoods & communities.” • “Our VISTA has built a new program for our affiliate [local Habitat], built a huge list of contacts for potential donors and volunteers and is now working to engage this list of contacts. She's introduced our affiliate [local Habitat] to a large number of community groups and organizations. She is building our visibility in a new community we have not touched before.”
Systems Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “VISTA members have improved our systems capacity to allow for growth and efficiency... For example, we now have a lot maintenance tracking system, which allows us to keep our responsibility to the community by keeping track of when our lots need servicing by landscapers.” • “This also allows our Family Services team to show lots that are in good condition to new homeowners.” • “Our VISTA's are able to join project teams and take on roles that we wouldn't otherwise be able to manage without their help with our current staff capacity.”

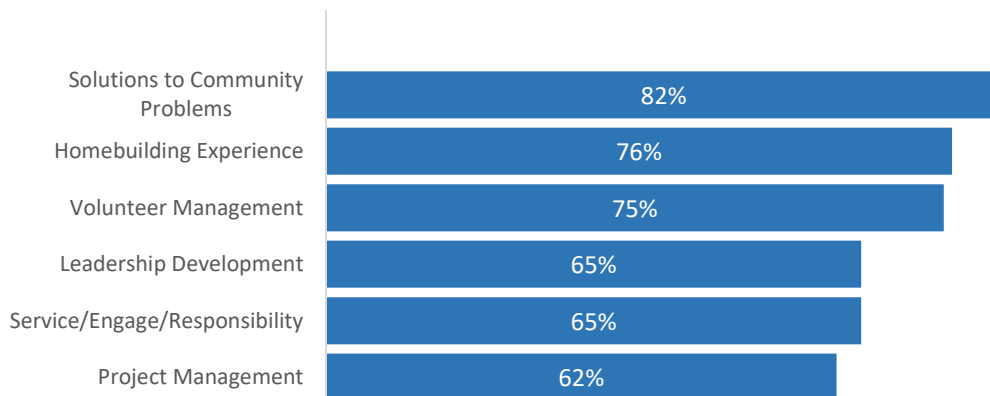
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Finding 4: AmeriCorps Members Benefit from their Year of Service by Learning New Skills and Expanding their Networks and Connections

Key Quantitative Findings

Alumni reported gains in knowledge and experience (Figure 4 below) as part of their service year experience with Habitat for Humanity (Sample size of 281 alumni). For example, 82% reported gaining knowledge about how to solve community problems. This will likely benefit service members beyond their year of service, as such knowledge is useful for civic engagement purposes beyond employment. As expected, a large percentage (75%) reported gaining useful knowledge about homebuilding but in addition, nearly two-thirds reported gaining knowledge about leadership development. In looking at whether these effects hold up as time passes, analyses showed that these findings hold as true for recent alumni as well as those who completed their service years ago.¹⁶ There were no significant differences, indicating that these benefits are durable over time.

4. Knowledge Gained Through Service Year



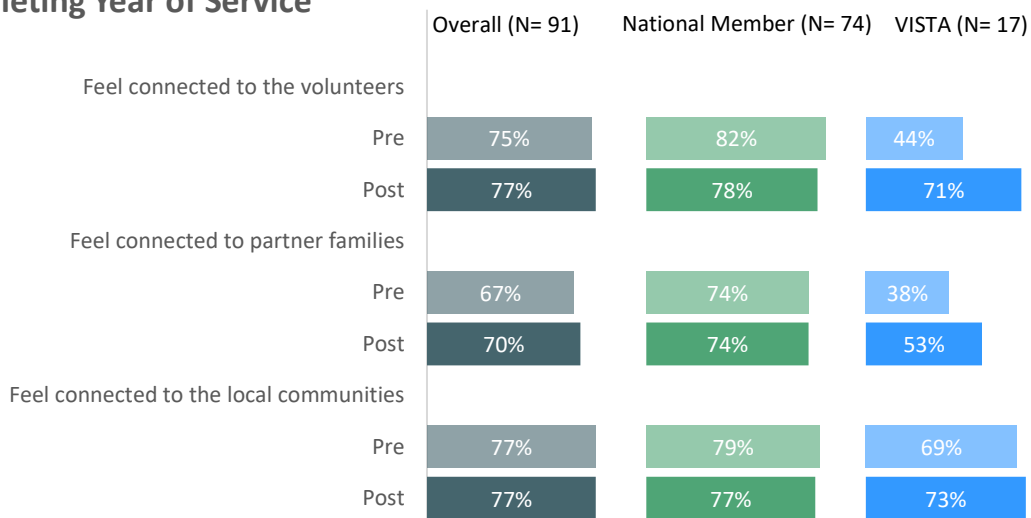
Aside from learning tangible skills and knowledge, Habitat AmeriCorps also report making valuable connections with community members and homeowner families (Figure 5). Upon entering the service year, expectations were clearly high, especially for National Members. At the end of the service year, VISTA members displayed the largest changes in reported connections with volunteers, homeowner families, and local communities. For example, at the beginning of the service year 44% of VISTA members reported

¹⁶ In order to test for any “recency effect” (e.g. whether recent cohorts feel more strongly than those who completed a year of service several years ago), t-tests were conducted on different dichotomous groups (i.e., those who completed in the last three years vs. those who completed more than three years ago) and no significant differences were observed.

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feeling connected to volunteers, whereas 71% did at the end of the year. Ultimately, large majorities of both categories report feeling connected with the constituents they are working with. These findings suggest, among other things, that the service year provides meaningful community engagement opportunities for participants. At the same time, this energy and enthusiasm can have positive impacts on the degree to which volunteers consistently and sustainably contribute their time to host sites. Qualitative data and case studies suggest it provides the added benefit of branding and communications with stakeholders, increasing the positive messaging in communities.

5. VISTA Members Increased Their Connection to Families After Completing Year of Service



Key Qualitative Findings

From qualitative case studies, it was evident that AmeriCorps members feel they gain a great deal from their involvement, including new employment, other economic, and graduate education opportunities. Several members, for instance, at Seattle King County HFH, have continued to manage construction, and others have entered public policy and administration programs with the University of Washington, an institution with close connections to the local Habitat organization. Themes from AmeriCorps members include:

- Improve skills and better help families and the broader community
- Gain a broad array of skills, and particularly gain from new understandings of affordable housing and homeownership
- Possess new understandings of housing and related issues (e.g., minimum wage, transportation,

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pollution, etc.) that had previously not thought about

- Get inspired through deep and memorable experiences with homeowners
- And experience interactions with diverse community members that help them learn and grow, and are constant sources of energy and motivation

Open-ended survey questions with alumni yielded rich data about the myriad ways that National and VISTA members benefitted from their year of service (Table 2). Skills and knowledge were certainly important but making connections and building relationships with others was one of the most frequently mentioned benefits of the service year.

Table 2. Additional Benefits of Service Year

Area	Examples From Host Sites
Significant Personal and Professional Relationships / Lifelong Friendships (N=60)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Some are my longest adult friendships. And still working for Habitat, alum and staff I worked with are my colleagues who I go to for advice and ideas on work-related issues.” • “I married a Habitat AmeriCorps Alumni. Every job I have had since has been tooted in the skills learned working with Habitat.” • “There are so many volunteers, [homeowner] families and even donors who will forever be part of my life and journey and I continue to do more through the organization.”
Learning About Nonprofits, Home Construction, and Leadership (N=49)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Learning about affordable housing, how non-profits operate, and gaining experience with volunteer recruitment and capacity building.” • “I gained invaluable leadership experience and confidence and a lasting knowledge of home construction.”
Passion / Increased Motivation and Appreciation of HFHI Mission (N=12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I found my passion for expanding access to housing as the most impactful aspect of my experience.” • “Habitat really fortified my dedication to community service.” • “Connection to Habitat's mission, working with great people, personal and professional development, sense of pride in national service.” • “The idea of working in partnership. Helping people is not about giving things away. It is about coming beside them and working together to improve ourselves and to encourage and support them in improving themselves.”

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● “During my time with Habitat an entire neighborhood was transformed. I remember being skeptical the first time I drove into the neighborhood, wondering why we would be willing to put families into this place. Then I contrast that with the neighborhood several years later.”
Critical Consciousness of Privilege, Inequality, and Injustice (N=10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● “Living on the stipend and having access to programs like food stamps was impactful given my privileged background.”● “Up until my service year, I led a pretty sheltered and privileged life. I didn’t have exposure to many people of different race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc. Habitat is a pretty mixed bag of people and, being forced to lead and interact with diverse people has completely changed my perspective on so many things. I have more empathy, I try to be more conscious of my personal biases, and I am more open-minded than I was before serving. While the staff and volunteers have played a big role in that shift, interacting with the [homeowner] families has been the biggest factor. The stories of loss and struggle, of fighting to recover from poor choices, and of personal sacrifice are awe-inspiring.”● “Habitat opened my eyes to systemic inequality in the U.S. Prior to my years of service, I had no knowledge of things like redlining that continue to affect people to this day, though they are no longer in effect.”

Another benefit of the service year that is frequently mentioned by National and VISTA members is that many aspects of the work give them a great sense of pride (Table 3 below). The service year often helps individuals form meaningful bonds with colleagues, volunteers, and homeowner families. Ultimately, respondents report that they felt a strong sense of community as a result of the work.

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Table 3. Expressions of Pride About Service Year

Area	Examples From Host Sites
<p>Pride and Satisfaction in Building Homes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Finishing a home and watching the happiness and joy shared by the homeowner and their family.” ● “I’m most proud of sticking with it, and I feel like the quantity of repairs we were able to complete as a team was a part of my biggest accomplishment.” ● “I built multiple houses so that others could have a place to live.” ● “Because of my experience I was able to help get a lot of work done at a quicker pace than what they are used to. Therefore, we were able to help more families and get more of the community involved.” ● “The quality, long-term repairs for homeowners in need. I definitely feel my work made a huge difference to them. I have a ton of pictures from my jobs because I was so proud of my work.”
<p>Pride and Satisfaction in Making Strong Connections and Building Relationships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I am most proud of the relationships I built at work, knowing that at any time they are there for any assistance I may need in the future.” ● “I am most proud of the relationships that I developed with several community members. A lot of positivity and excitement was grown in our communities simply because members knew there was someone who they could contact who would listen to them and care.” ● “Most proud of the relationships I developed with applicants and office staff” ● “Creating an annual event for the affiliate [local Habitat] that connects them with people from the community.” ● “My connection to the homeowners... I loved talking to them about their future home and giving them new ideas for what they could do with all the spaces.”

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Finding 5: Habitat AmeriCorps Program Helps Advance the Careers of National and VISTA Members

Key Quantitative Findings

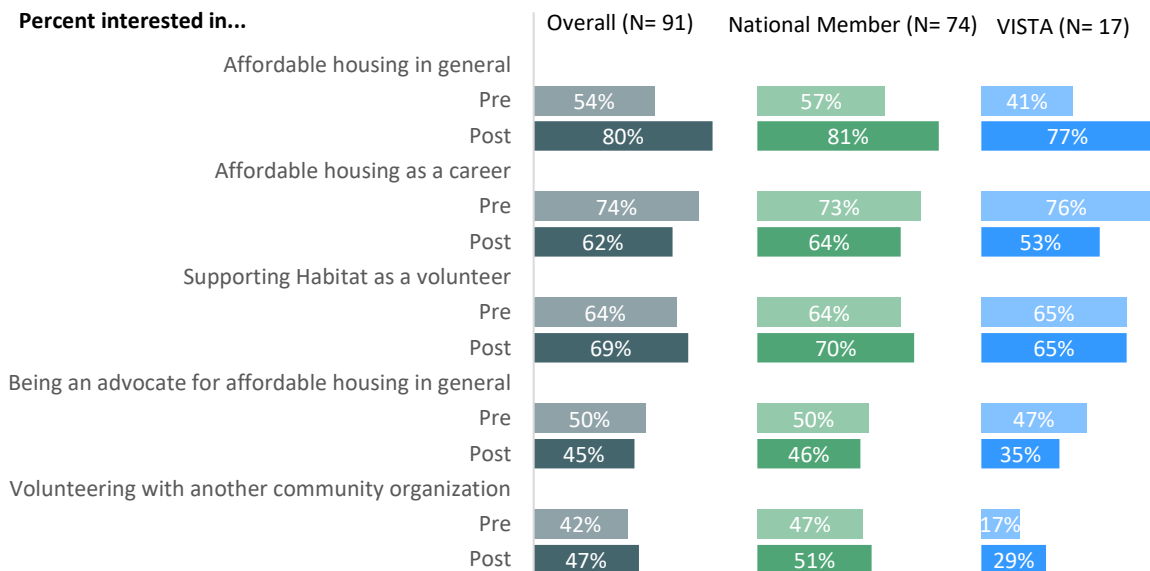
The Habitat AmeriCorps program provides clear benefits for National and VISTA members in terms of shaping and furthering their careers. For example, at the conclusion of their service year:

- 62% of members reported that their AmeriCorps experience would help *their chances of finding a job*
- 72% felt that their AmeriCorps experience would improve *their performance at a future job*
- 59% felt it would help them *make a career change*

A year of AmeriCorps service with Habitat for Humanity may impact the career trajectory of AmeriCorps members, providing a pipeline into community development professions. Compared to when they began, AmeriCorps members report, at the end of their service year, being significantly more interested in affordable housing development (see Figure 6 below). Prior to their service year, approximately 54% were interested, whereas approximately 80% were interested afterwards. They reported being significantly more likely to volunteer with another affordable housing provider or community development organization. In addition, the alumni survey revealed that 64% remain interested or active in an affordable housing career, with 33% of participants going on to work for a local Habitat organization at the conclusion of their service. A year of service is both helpful for Host sites, and successful in creating ambassadors for affordable housing.

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6. Increased Interest in Affordable Housing and Volunteering After Service Year



Key Qualitative Findings

From qualitative case studies, it was evident that Habitat AmeriCorps members feel they gain a great deal from their involvement, including new employment and graduate education opportunities. Staff in both Seminole County and nearby Orlando are made up of past AmeriCorps members. All administrators and other staff members and volunteers repeatedly brought up how the continued presence of these members brought more consistency, institutional knowledge and overall continuity to operations. For both host sites, the Habitat AmeriCorps program is an essential workforce development instrument leading to some of their most effective permanent staff. As one of them explained “Ideally, we want to keep the members and hire them on.”

Open-ended survey questions given to alumni provided a rich look at the ways that the service year impacted the career and learning trajectory of National and VISTA members. Table 4 displays the most frequently mentioned themes were: that the service year directly influenced career choices, often in nonprofits, or that, at the very least, the service year played a strong role in supporting successful job searches.

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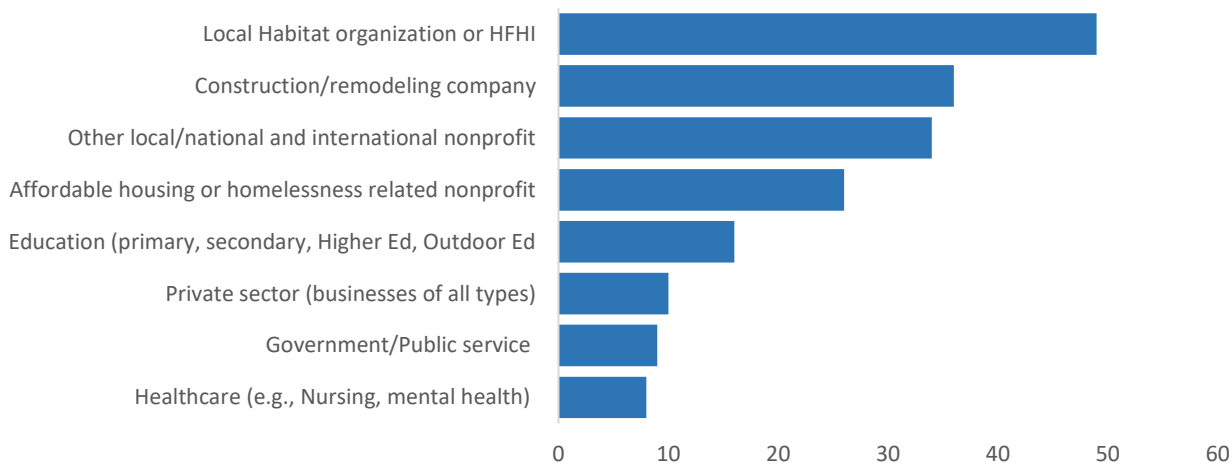
Table 4. Career Benefits of Service Year

Area / Theme	Examples From Alumni
Influenced Career Direction (N=27)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “My career was redirected towards non-profit and public service after my two terms of service”. ● “Yes, I decided I wanted to serve less fortunate populations of our society from then on and decided to make working for Habitat for Humanity a career choice.” ● “They pretty much changed everything.... the people at Habitat are a big part of the reason I changed my career path to work there.”
Supported Subsequent Job Searches (N=16)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I still keep in regular contact with my Executive Director. She has served as a reference for me for several job opportunities throughout my career. I also was able to secure my first job post-AmeriCorps as a direct result of the relationship...” ● “I have been guided about career goals and how to accomplish them. Also have gotten interviews because of the people I met during the service year”. ● “I wanted to work in the nonprofit sector for quite some time, and was having a hard time finding entry level positions. AmeriCorps allowed me to gain the experience and knowledge I needed to become a full time employee. The staff I worked with and still currently work with are incredibly supportive of my growth and well-being. I have so many wonderful role models to look up to.”
Influenced Pursuing Additional Education (N=5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “My supervisor encouraged me to apply for Grad School” ● “Yes, one AmeriCorps alumni that I served with influenced me to get a Master's Degree.”

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In terms of workforce development, the service year clearly provides a strong pathway into housing, construction, and other nonprofit organization work, especially Habitat for Humanity. Figure 7 below illustrates that over 75% of alumni surveyed (N=181) report going to work in one of these areas. This is strong evidence that the service year instills a lifelong commitment to public service and making impacts to communities through housing and related services.

7. Where AmeriCorps Members go to Work After Service Year



National and VISTA members often stay on in an expanded capacity with their Host site or find work at another Habitat organization. In Seattle-King County, for example, many of the current class of National and VISTA members were planning on committing to another year of service, and some of the permanent staff members had started as Members or VISTA members. Many see the service year as an opportunity to commit long-term to Habitat organizations, as evidenced by the select quotes from members surveyed upon completion of their service year.

- “Staying on with my local Habitat as a site supervisor for at least awhile and hope for a promotion to the office.”
- “Becoming the best Assistant Site Supervisor that I can be.”
- “To become the mortgage service person for our affiliate.”
- “I hope [my host site] will offer me a full time position as the Outreach Coordinator or give me a great reference for another job, based on my performance.”
- “I have been hired to be the next Director of Volunteers at my affiliate. I will start this position at the conclusion of my AmeriCorps service year.”
- “Hope to stay with Habitat long term.”

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Challenges and Recommendations

- 1. Notifying Relevant Staff.** Several local Habitat survey respondents (N=14) reported that they were new and had little information about AmeriCorps. The first challenge for HFHI is for all relevant staff at local Habitats to be aware of and understand the value that the AmeriCorps program can bring to their organization. Thus, HFHI can focus on reaching out specifically to local Habitats that have recently merged, hired new executive directors or had other significant administrative changes in order to ensure the new staff are fully aware of the program and all of its benefits.
- 2. Understanding the Pros and Cons.** Next, the local Habitat organizations need to see the pros outweighing the cons of going through the application process, followed by the recruitment, hiring, onboarding, training, mentorship, and record keeping associated with hosting.
- 3. Perceived Barriers.** The biggest perceived barrier to hosting members included lack of time to plan, apply for, supervise, and support members, as well as concern over the stipend expense and overwhelming amounts of paperwork (N=78). Common reasons mentioned for not hosting included not having set aside funds in the budget, and not having adequate staff to supervise and manage the reporting for members. Here is an example response from one local Habitat who was particularly concerned with the paperwork:
 - “We have used them in the past, in fact we had four, and hired three of them, one of which is still with us, one advanced to lead her own affiliate, and one returned to architecture school. We have not used [AmeriCorps more recently] because the paperwork became ridiculous for us to manage.”

Connected with concerns related to costs, it appears that a subset of local Habitat organizations have opted to find participants through an alternative source. For instance, here are a few quotes from local Habitats who have not recently utilized members through HFHI:

- “We have applied [to AmeriCorps] directly and not through HFHI.”
- “Utilizing Cowlitz AmeriCorps is about 1/2 the cost of using HFHI and training is shared.”
- “The cost per member through the state was significantly less than HFHI. Because of the size of the program, it made sense to run it through the state.”
- “We've hosted 5 NCCC group's and the partnership better meets our needs. We've also partnered with the local CAP agency for VISTAs.”

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While the perceived barriers are real and problematic for some local Habitats, others have found ways around them. These local Habitats are highly motivated because of the most appealing aspects of the program and the benefits it brings. When compared to the cost of hiring a full-time employee most host sites feel that “The low-cost of the program is attractive.”

The potential to have somebody excited to work with Habitat come and work for a year, possibly two, at a reduced salary, is a “no brainer” for many.

Hosts value that, “AmeriCorps members bring energy, enthusiasm, and a desire to support our mission and work. Often they see things through a different lens, and can provide invaluable feedback or information to the affiliate.” Furthermore, “Having enthusiastic new members around revives the staff. It is wonderful to have fresh ideas and energy. Having the AmeriCorps also helps build the capacity of our affiliate to reach more families and build more homes.”

4. Thoughtful Preparation. For local Habitats that do see the potential benefits as worth the effort, thoughtful preparation can enhance the likelihood of a successful year in which the AmeriCorps members add sustaining capacity to the host site. Here are a set of specific recommendations from evaluation survey respondent, and interviewees about the preparation steps:

- Try to have various members of the local Habitat beyond the host site manager become familiar with the requirements and guidelines of the AmeriCorps program so they can support professional development and training for members
- Develop a detailed plan for how members will be assigned tasks

Host sites should work toward more clear roles, specific directions, and accountability with the members. For many members this is their first work experience—they need more capacity and tool-building. They can help the member understand the expectations of the service year by developing key job descriptions at the local Habitat.

5. Strengthen Recruitment Methods. Many thoughtful and prepared local Habitat organizations that could benefit from the AmeriCorps program are not able to participate due to a lack of applicants aware of the opportunity. Therefore, strong recruitment efforts should include both “old school” and “new school” tactics including but not limited to: promoting the program through current board members, staff, alumni, members, volunteers, homeowner families, local libraries, community centers, houses of worship/faith groups, high schools, vocational schools, college campus habitat chapters, career centers, job boards, social media, Craigslist, online job sites. Use both virtual and printed flyers/postings. “Start early (actually, never stop...keep with the mindset of ongoing promotion of the program throughout the year).”

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One local Habitat stated, “Serviceyear.org has been our most successful and helpful resource.” They reported they “have found success with the candidates that were forwarded through the Service Year Alliance and Brassring.” Other popular sites include, npo.net, indeed.com, LinkedIn job postings, idealist.org, and career builder.

- 6. Utilizing Alumni.** Alumni should be used more intentionally to promote the program to potential new members. Alumni and local Habitat staff suggested, “Lay out clear next steps at the end of service.” Others recommended, planning post service year recruitment efforts early as possible. “Alums are a pipeline for new volunteers. Currently they are not being leveraged enough in this way.”
- 7. Marketing.** Attempt to make the job ads attractive and explain that skills gained during the year of service can be leveraged in a variety of ways including but not limited to, full-time jobs, and personal growth. Construction skills can be used to rehab your own home in the future. At the national HFHI level, members and alumni suggested making audio and video commercials explaining what AmeriCorps/VISTA is all about. And trying to lobby the CNCS to change its name to AmeriCorps as way to raise the profile of the program’s name.
- 8. Leadership.** Several current members who had completed previous years of service felt strongly that the Leadership Conference was a valuable asset to the program and should be reinstated:
 - “Bring back the leadership conference. That is something that helped me a lot during my two years of my service year and still contributes for my third and last year of service.”
 - “Sell the leadership aspects of serving as an AmeriCorps as this is the most transferable and versatile skill set gained during a year with Habitat for Humanity.”

In order to increase retention and quality of experiences once members are on site, host sites can benefit by continuing to support members by providing them with trainings, workshops, and more face-to-face attention. Host Sites recommended spending more time on training and team building at the beginning of their service term to build rapport and trust. Then use weekly one-on-one meetings to keep them engaged and feeling supported.

Others recommended including members in all monthly staff meetings, as well as having them go through construction training and completing an end of term passion project for Habitat. Other host sites suggest, “Increase opportunities for members for more team building, and for crossover between host sites (host site swaps) for increased learning.” In effect, the host sites who were satisfied with their experience argued, “the more investment in members, the greater potential for

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investment of members in the affiliate.” Another suggestion to support retention and sustained quality engagement was to, “allow construction members one or two days a month away from the construction site to do office or not physically demanding work (rest working days).” As in all modern-day organizations there is a need to more intentionally support diverse individuals and cultures, inside and outside the organization. Focus on generational struggles [e.g., a leader at one of the host sites felt that many young people don’t understand appropriate norms of workplace behavior]. One host site suggested to “have a ‘welcome/get to know you’ lunch with our leadership and many more activities.”

9. Housing affordability is a major challenge with the small AmeriCorps stipend. Many members utilize food stamps and can’t afford housing without rental assistance from Habitat, some have sought second jobs. Repeatedly members, alumni and local Habitats all, suggested making housing or housing stipends available if at all possible. All groups appreciated and understood the importance of keeping costs low for host sites and the valuable learning that occurs among members who gain lived experiences of and empathy associated with poverty. However, offering housing would help with remove barriers to recruiting talented passionate members, and increase their retention and quality of the experience for members and their productivity and engagement with the local Habitats. One member who was unable to complete his year of service due to housing instability stated,

- “My only suggestion would be to follow through with housing availability. At first, I was under the impression that we were going to have the opportunity to share rent in a room in one of the houses we were working on. Since that fell through, I was unable to complete my year due to the cost of commuting.”

10. Incentives and Supports. In addition to housing support some host sites are creative about providing other small yet meaningful incentives and supports. As one member stated, “Some of the perks that my affiliate provided like housing, cell-phone reimbursements etc. made a huge difference for me.” Another member stated, “any support, such as small stipends, goes a long way, even giving guidance on where to live and realistic expectations about cost of living.” Again, these perks can be useful both with recruitment and retention of members.

- “Lifestyle training” is good, such as how to live on a small budget while still keeping a good quality of life. In large urban centers, it is difficult to make ends meet.”
- “More local empowerment, less rules and restrictions on how they can be used”
- “More participation with our board members”