



Re: The Untapped Potential of Volunteerism and Service Learning As A Pathway to Employment for Youth with Disabilities

Dear Colleague:

Throughout the year, we must be vigilant in our efforts to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities, including our nation's youth with disabilities. Volunteerism can provide a great opportunity for youth with disabilities to gain important work-based skills and develop a network of contacts. Because of the untapped potential that service-learning represents, the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) are joining together to tell you about the importance of work-based and service-learning for all youth, including those with disabilities. In addition, we'll discuss income exclusions available to Social Security beneficiaries participating in service learning opportunities under AmeriCorps, in which participants receive a living stipend.

Work-Based Learning Experiences - Why They are Important

Work experiences, both paid and voluntary, have been recognized as critical components of preparing youth, including those with disabilities, for the transition to adulthood. In fact, the Office of Disability Employment Policy and the National Collaborative on Workforce & Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) cited these experiences in the [Guideposts for Success](#). Volunteerism and service-learning are included among these on-the-job training experiences that can help prepare youth by:

- Developing career readiness skills, including basic work skills (often referred to as "soft skills"), such as attendance, punctuality, teamwork, and conflict resolution;
- Providing knowledge of specific occupational skills;
- Offering opportunities to establish a work history and connections; and
- Providing a forum for exploring different occupations.

Even short-term work experiences can be valuable as a way for all youth to develop skills, contacts, and awareness about career options. Research shows that having a competitive paid job in secondary school is the strongest predictor of job success for youth with disabilities after graduation (Test et. al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2005; Luecking and Fabian, 2000; Colley and Jamison, 1998). Moreover, both paid and unpaid work experiences help youth with disabilities acquire jobs at higher wages after they graduate (Colley and Jamison, 1998).

Benefits Associated with Service Learning and Volunteerism

Numerous studies have identified that youth who participate in quality community-based service-learning experiences can gain the following benefits and others which contribute to improved transition outcomes and positive youth development:

- Access to the range of supports and opportunities (or developmental assets) they need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible
- Increased civic engagement and community involvement
- Improved understanding of how they can impact social challenges
- Higher academic achievement and interest in furthering their education
- Enhanced problem-solving skills, ability to work in teams, and planning abilities

(Roehlkepartain, 2007; Chung, 1997; Coe-Regan et al, in press; Lewis-Charp et al., 2003; Tannenbaum, S. C., 2007; the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2002 and YMCA of the USA, 2004)

For youth with disabilities, service learning provides an additional benefit. By being actively engaged in service to their communities, they gain a sense of increased self-worth associated with being providers rather than service recipients.

The Link Between Volunteerism and Competitive Employment

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) is an independent federal agency with the responsibility to mobilize Americans into service through three programs: Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and The Social Innovation Fund. These programs support service-learning in schools, higher education institutions, community-based organizations, and full-time service across the nation.

New research released by CNCS in June 2013 provides the most compelling empirical research to date establishing an association between volunteering and employment in the United States. Key findings on the connection between volunteering and employment include the following:

- Volunteers have a 27 percent higher likelihood of finding a job after being out of work than non-volunteers;
- Volunteers without a high school diploma have a 51 percent higher likelihood of finding employment;
- Volunteers living in rural areas have a 55 percent higher likelihood of finding employment.

CNCS also found that volunteering is associated with an increased likelihood of finding employment for all volunteers regardless of a person's gender, age, ethnicity, geographical area, or the job market conditions. (Spera et al, 2013).

According to CNCS, volunteering can help people find employment because:

- Volunteering increases an individual's networks and connections;
- Volunteering increases an individual's experience or useful education, skills, and training; and,
- Volunteering helps to create a positive impression in a competitive job market.

Income Exclusions for Service Learning Stipends Available to Social Security Beneficiaries Participating in AmeriCorps

Despite the many benefits associated with service learning, many youth with disabilities who are Social Security benefit recipients and their families may be hesitant to participate in such programs because they fear that they will lose these benefits. However, there are a number of income exemptions available to beneficiaries who participate in AmeriCorps.

What Is AmeriCorps?

Launched in 1993 under the National and Community Service Trust Act, AmeriCorps is a network of service programs that engage Americans to meet the nation's needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment. AmeriCorps members serve at more than 3,000 not-for-profit organizations through three programs:

Through AmeriCorps State and National, the broadest of the programs, grants are provided to a network of local and national organizations and agencies committed to using national service to address critical community needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment. AmeriCorps VISTA provides full-time members to nonprofit, faith-based and other community organizations, and public agencies to create and expand programs that bring low-income individuals and communities out of poverty. AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) is a full-time, team-based, residential program for men and women ages 18-24. Its mission is to strengthen communities and develop leaders through direct, team-based national and community service.

Currently, CNCS does not track the disability status of its service members or alumni, but volunteerism can provide an important step on the pathway to employment for youth with disabilities. AmeriCorps members receive a modest living allowance (\$10,000 – \$14,000 for 10 – 12 months of service) and assistance with college costs and student loans. Some programs also provide housing.

What Income Exclusions are Available?

Under the Heroes Earning Assistance and Relief Act (HEART Act) of 1998, AmeriCorps members with disabilities who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits due to their disability, can receive an AmeriCorps stipend without risk of losing their disability benefits. Those participating in AmeriCorps VISTA can also receive their stipend without losing benefits related to their disability. For SSI beneficiaries, this income exclusion also includes stipends received while participating in the AmeriCorps NCCC and AmeriCorps State and Local programs.

The table below explains which AmeriCorps programs have income exclusions for SSI and SSDI recipients.

SOCIAL SECURITY INCOME EXCLUSIONS AVAILABLE FOR AMERICORPS PROGRAMS		
	Work Incentive Available for	
	SSI Beneficiaries	SSDI Beneficiaries
AmeriCorps NCCC	X	
AmeriCorps State and Local	X	
AmeriCorps VISTA	X	X

Youth, with and without disabilities, glean important benefits by engaging in work-based learning including service learning. Moreover, although CNCS' recent research did not specifically look at volunteers with disabilities, the study suggests that volunteering is associated with an increased likelihood of finding employment particularly for volunteers who experience significant barriers when entering the workforce. To learn more about these benefits and the AmeriCorps income exclusions available to Social Security beneficiaries see the following:

Engaging Youth in Work Experiences: An Innovative Strategies Practice Brief

<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/innovative-strategies/practice-briefs/engaging-youth-in-work-experiences>

Civic Engagement Strategies for Transition Age Youth

<http://www.findyouthinfo.gov/youth-briefs/civic-engagement-strategies-transition-age-youth-intro>

Benefits of Community-Based Service-Learning

http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/cb_facts/benefits-community-based-service-learning

Youth in Action! - Participating in Internships and Work-Based Experiences

<http://www.ncwd-youth.info/tip-sheet/internships-and-work-based-experiences>

The Social Security Red Book 2013

<https://www.ssa.gov/redbook/eng/main.htm>

How do AmeriCorps payments affect SSA disability benefits?

<http://vcu-ntc.org/resources/questionsOfTheWeek/How%20do%20Americorps%20payments%20affect%20SSA%20disability%20benefits%20August%202011.pdf>

AmeriCorps and Service-Learning 101

http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/tribal_facts/ameriCorps_and_service-learning_101

The National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP) <http://serviceandinclusion.org/index.php>
Serve.gov

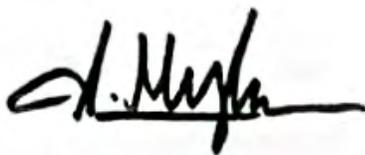
The National Service-Learning Clearing House

<http://www.servicelearning.org/>

Sincerely,



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