

Evidence Brief

Effective CNCS-Funded Economic Opportunity Programs

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Evidence Brief: Effective CNCS-Funded Economic Opportunity Programs

The Corporation for National and Community Service is the federal agency for volunteering, service, and civic engagement. The agency engages millions of Americans in citizen service through its AmeriCorps and Senior Corps programs and leads the nation's volunteering and service efforts. Through AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and other programs,¹ the agency has made investments in vulnerable and at-risk individuals, families, and communities across the country, working with local partners to solve their most pressing challenges and improve the economic well-being of those served. The priority objectives of many of the CNCS-funded programs within the Economic Opportunity focus area center around employability, job placement/advancement, income growth, housing, financial literacy, and financial health.

Featured in this brief are the CNCS-funded interventions in the Economic Opportunity area with positive results from high-quality, independent, and rigorous impact studies.² However, CNCS's impact footprint goes beyond CNCS-funded organizations and their participants, and includes benefits to members gained during their service experience. The results of a survey of nearly 4,000 AmeriCorps alumni,³ and findings from the CNCS member exit survey, demonstrate that service benefits members' careers. Other research studies, like the one conducted at Tufts University, show that national service has a significantly positive impact on getting a job interview.⁴

Who did these programs serve?

The interventions span a range of target groups. Funded programs serve low-income and at-risk target groups, primarily adults, with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, in communities across the country.⁵

What did they accomplish?

The Economic Opportunity-focused programs supported by CNCS produced the strongest favorable and measured outcomes in the areas of:

- Certifications/skills obtained
- Credit rating improved
- Debt reduced
- Financial hardship/strain decreased
- Employment obtained
- Income increased
- Nonfinancial advancement in the current job
- Wealth built
- Wage growth

How did these programs do it?

The evidence-based programs employ a variety of models, including sectoral, industry-based, and soft skills training; establishing relationships with employers; and other employment and income supports for participants, such as job placement, post-employment counseling, career advancement coaching, financial literacy training, remediation, and assistance.

Of the four Economic Opportunity interventions that demonstrated strong evidence of effectiveness:

- Three (75 percent) addressed employability through education and/or job training, or other employment supports.⁶
- Two (50 percent) targeted financial literacy and used two distinct strategies. One intervention provided financial counseling and income-support counseling, and another intervention provided financial assistance in the form of matched savings accounts.

¹ For more information, see www.nationalservice.gov

² Based on an independent meta-synthesis study conducted in 2018 (Richman, S., Maxwell, N., Streke, A., Needels, K., & Eddins, K. (2018). Evidence of Effectiveness in CNCS-Funded Interventions: Benchmark Findings. Prepared for the Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Evaluation. Chicago, IL: Mathematica Policy Research), these programs had a range of effect sizes from 0.03 to 0.70 and an average, statistically significant, effect size of 0.39 across these impact studies. This corresponds to a 15 percentage point increase in favorable outcomes for participants, and indicates that the average person in the treatment group would score higher than 65 percent of a control group that was initially equivalent.

³ Friedman, E., Freeman, B., Phillips, B., Rosenthal, L., Robinson, D., Miller, H., & Porowski, A. (2016). New Methods for Assessing AmeriCorps Alumni Outcomes: Final Survey Technical Report. Prepared for the Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Evaluation. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, Inc.

⁴ How Does Participating in National Service Impact Employment and Professional Development? <https://nationalservice.gov/documents/2018/how-does-participating-national-service-impact-employment-and-professional>

⁵ More details on target groups can be found in Table 2.

⁶ These programs had an average effect size of 0.42.

MEMBERS' ROLE IN IMPLEMENTATION AND SCALING OF EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

A key concern for CNCS and its grantees is how national service can contribute to the implementation and scaling of evidence-based interventions in ways that facilitate the achievement of their intended outcomes. A review of evidence-based interventions funded by CNCS indicates that AmeriCorps member functions within these interventions generally fall into two categories: (1) direct service providers, and (2) coordination or support roles within the organization or at implementation sites.

One example of members providing direct services is **Financial Opportunity Centers** by Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), where AmeriCorps members served as employment or financial counselors and carried out other program activities. Findings from a 2017 independent meta-analysis study suggest that organizations that deliver service with AmeriCorps members are as effective, if not slightly more effective, when compared with organizations where similar services are delivered without the assistance of AmeriCorps members.⁷ This is promising for grantees seeking to scale their interventions with the national service members involved. In the Economic Opportunity interventions focus area, members can serve in direct service roles in the case of the interventions noted in this brief, such as career advisors or coaches in the **National Fund for Workforce Solutions (NFWS)** and **WorkAdvance**, and as Volunteer Income Tax Assistance operators for **SaveUSA**. Additional information about these interventions can be found in Table 1 below.⁸

In addition to providing direct service, national service members also take on coordination or support positions that are important for enabling organizations to successfully scale up. From managing day-to-day program operations to organizational capacity building, members serve in positions such as site coordinators, volunteer recruiters and managers, and resource developers to support the implementation of these interventions.

TABLE 1. EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS FUNDED BY CNCS AND THEIR KEY FINDINGS

INTERVENTIONS	KEY FINDINGS
Financial Opportunity Centers (FOCs) seek to increase low-income families' financial prospects by providing integrated services in three core areas: financial counseling, employment assistance, and assistance with accessing public benefits to supplement income from work.	FOC group participants were employed at a 21% higher rate than comparison group participants. They were also significantly more likely to have positive activity on their credit reports, more likely to have prime credit scores after two years, and less likely to have any debts, such as medical or legal debts, child support arrears, or back taxes.
National Fund for Workforce Solutions matches funds to invest in Regional Funding Collaboratives that support local workforce partnerships to design and administer programs to help workers obtain the skills required to meet the workforce needs identified by local employers.	Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati participants were employed in healthcare jobs at two to three times the rate of nonparticipants, and boasted 50% higher earnings. Employment rates among participants in the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership's Construction Pathways were 67% to 72%. This is 9% to 22% higher than participants at matched comparison sites. Participants also had 56% higher earnings than the matched comparison group.
WorkAdvance boosts the earnings of unemployed and low-wage working adults by helping them obtain quality jobs in targeted sectors with opportunities for career growth. After placement, the program continues to assist participants to help them advance in their chosen careers.	Participants at three out of four sites saw annual earnings increase significantly over the control group. WorkAdvance was able to significantly increase earnings and employment rates for the long-term unemployed, a group that has proved to be resistant to many other policy interventions. WorkAdvance significantly increased employment in the target sector at all implementation sites.
SaveUSA encourages low- and moderate-income individuals to set aside money from their tax refund for savings. Those who maintain their initially pledged savings amount throughout a full year receive a 50% match on that amount.	SaveUSA increased the percentage of individuals with any nonretirement savings by almost 8%, and increased the average total amount of savings held by \$522, or 30%, above the average for the group that did not have access to a SaveUSA account. These effects were present even after most of the SaveUSA group no longer had access to a 50% match on savings.

⁷ Richman, S., Anderson, M., Streke A., & Eddins, K. (2017). Evidence of Effectiveness: Intervention Evidence Across the AmeriCorps and Social Innovation Fund Programs. Chicago, IL: Mathematica Policy Research. Submitted to the Corporation for National and Community Service under contract no. GS10F0050L/CNSHQ16F0049.

⁸ The range of interventions were implemented by subgrantees of intermediaries funded by CNCS, including the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, Jobs for the Future, the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City, and the Center for Economic Opportunity.

TABLE 2. PROGRAM BY INTERVENTION CORE COMPONENTS, OUTCOMES, TARGETED POPULATIONS, AND IMPLEMENTATION SETTINGS

PROGRAM (SITE EVALUATED)	CORE COMPONENTS	OUTCOMES	TARGETED POPULATION ⁹	IMPLEMENTATION SETTING
Financial Opportunity Centers (Chicago, IL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial counseling Employment assistance Income support counseling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment obtained Income increased Wealth built Credit rating improved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age 18+ Low income Homeless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based organizations Urban Geographic area described as national or across multiple regions
National Fund for Workforce Solutions (OH and WI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job readiness training Assistance obtaining employability and training credentials Industry-focused training Job search assistance Assistance with enrollment in college coursework Specialized apprenticeships Pre-apprenticeship training Career advancement services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Income increased Employment obtained 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low income African American, Hispanic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based organizations and employers Urban Midwest
WorkAdvance (New York, NY; Northeast OH; Tulsa, OK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intensive screening Pre-employment and career readiness services Occupational skills training Job development and placement services Career retention and advancement services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Certification/skills obtained Wage growth Nonfinancial advancement in the current job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age 18+ Low income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based organizations and employers Urban Northeast, Midwest, and South
SaveUSA (NJ, NY, OK, TX)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Matched savings accounts for low- and moderate-income tax filers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial hardship/strain decreased Debt reduced Income increased Wealth built 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age 18+ Low income African American, Hispanic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based organizations Urban Northeast and South

⁹ Target population refers to the primary groups served by the organization, but not to the exclusion of any individual with similar needs. No CNCS-funded program excludes on the basis of classes protected under federal law.

TABLE 3. KEY STUDIES THAT FORM THE BASIS FOR EVIDENCE

INTERVENTION	DOCUMENT	EVALUATOR
Financial Opportunity Centers	Roder, A. (2016). First Steps on the Road to Financial Well-being: Final Report from the Evaluation of LISC’s Financial Opportunity Centers. Economic Mobility Corporation. (Link)	Economic Mobility Corporation
National Fund for Workforce Solutions	Michaelides, M., Mueser, P., & Mbwana, K. (2014). Quasi-Experimental Impact Study of NFWS/SIF Workforce Partnership Programs: Evidence on the Effectiveness of Three Workforce Partnership Programs in Ohio. Washington, DC: IMPAQ International. (Link)	IMPAQ International
WorkAdvance	Hendra, R., Greenberg, D.H., Hamilton, G., Oppenheim, A., Pennington, A., Schaberg, K., & Tessler, B.L. (2016). Encouraging Evidence on a Sector-focused Advancement Strategy: Two-year Impacts from the WorkAdvance Demonstration. New York: MDRC. (Link)	MDRC
SaveUSA	Azurdia, G., & Freedman, S. (2016). Encouraging Nonretirement Savings at Tax Time: Final Impact Findings from the SaveUSA Evaluation. New York: MDRC. (Link)	MDRC