

Narratives

Executive Summary

In the Maryland Conservation Corps (MCC), 35 AmeriCorps members will leverage an additional 1,000 volunteers. At the end of each one-year period of service, they will have improved 1,000 acres of public lands in Maryland state parks and other public lands, and improved or created 125 linear miles of trail. Members of this youth corps will work in crews based in 7 Maryland State Parks, geographically located to best address pressing needs. This project will focus on the CNCS Focus Area of Environmental Stewardship. The CNCS investment of \$464,490 will be matched with \$908,481.

Rationale and Approach

1.a. NEED:

MCC was created in 1984 and modeled after the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps. Like the original CCC, MCC engages members in intensive environmental conservation efforts that improve public lands, trails and waterways. By leveraging volunteers and focusing on young volunteers in particular, MCC builds a cadre of smart, skilled conservationists who protect the vital natural resources upon which citizens and communities rely, not only today, but for the future.

MD is the 4th most densely populated state in the U.S. According to the MD Department of Planning, MD's population will reach 6.7 million by 2030, up from 5.8 million in 2010, as reported by the U.S. Census. This increased growth will require the development of an additional 650,000 acres of land, over 10% of MD's total land mass. The community at large suffers environmental damages as a result of this, including loss of open space and reduced water quality. But lands managed by the Maryland Park Service (MPS) are particularly vulnerable to human overuse. The places that were originally set aside as some of MD's most pristine natural areas are experiencing environmental degradation at an accelerated rate. The following are just a few examples of ways that 11 million visitors annually can "love" these special places to death:

1) Soil compaction and erosion cause damage to understory plants, harm tree roots, and kill trees over time. Eroded soil washes into streams and rivers, increasing sediment and negatively impacting water quality. MCC corrects this by designing, constructing and maintaining trails and other amenities (boardwalks, signage, canoe launch areas, etc.) that guide the public away from sensitive areas, and by restoring and minimizing this type of damage when it occurs.

2) When humans move through natural areas, we often unknowingly carry seeds of invasive plant

Narratives

species on our boots, on the tires of our cars and bicycles, or in our backpacks and other gear. One classic example of this is Japanese Stiltgrass. When it moves into a new area, it can be observed first along the very edges of a trail, close to a parking lots and trailheads. Over the course of several years one can observe this growth continue to penetrate deeper into natural areas, traveling along hiking paths, finally consuming hundreds of acres. This understory plant has no wildlife value of its own, but chokes out many plants that once provided food, shelter or nesting materials for songbirds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and small mammals. MCC does many invasive species removal projects, and also plants rain gardens, enclosures to protect specific native plants, floating wetlands and more, to protect or reestablish native plants in parks. MCC members also educate the public about the importance of planting native plants in their own gardens.

3) Illegal or "rogue" trails, built by perhaps well-meaning but uninformed park patrons, can endanger rare and threatened species and destroy the beauty of scenic areas. Rogue trails also contribute to forest fragmentation, destroying habitat for forest interior dwelling species who require large tracts of unbroken tree canopy for their survival. Even a trail just a few feet wide can create enough fragmentation to destroy the habitat for many songbirds. MCC works to prevent and offset this damage by creating sustainable public access with careful thought as to design and location. MCC also installs signing, fencing etc. to divert traffic from sensitive areas.

4) Thousands of private homes and businesses adjoin park property along the boundaries, and these property owners can do major damage to the resource by encroaching onto park property. Some cut down trees and claim park land for their back yard, others build obstacle courses for all-terrain vehicles. Some use park property to build swimming pools, dump hazardous waste, abandon junked cars, pasture goats or cattle, and more. MCC AmeriCorps members are a major partner helping the Maryland Park Service (MPS) protect and reclaim thousands of miles of park boundaries. They work with surveyors to locate and post boundaries, and do resource restoration projects to reverse the damage done by encroachments.

Over 11 million visitors come to MD State Parks every year. While the 7 MCC crew sites represent only 11% of the total land units in the Maryland Park Service (MPS) system, they are responsible for hosting over 1/3 of the state's total visitation. This imbalance further exacerbates the challenge of preserving and restoring Maryland's environmentally important natural resources in these locations.

Narratives

Currently, the MPS has a backlog of critical maintenance needs that exceeds 36 million dollars. Many of the projects on that backlogged list are documented cases of severely degraded natural areas such as trails, ponds, and stream banks that are in need of restoration, or projects that are necessary to prevent future degradation of wildlife habitat.

Correcting this backlog has major economic implications for the State of MD. According to the 2010 MD State Parks Economic Impact and Visitor Study completed by the MD Department of Business and Economic Development, MD State Park visitors directly spend more than \$567 million during their trips to State Parks, producing a total economic impact of more than \$650 million annually. Additionally, state park visitor spending supported more than 10,000 full-time jobs and generated more than \$39 million in state and local retail, gasoline, hotel, and income taxes. The study also documents the importance of this impact in rural communities where other economic opportunities may be limited. According to the report, 70 percent of spending and employment impacts are concentrated within 20 minutes of state parks in local "gateway communities," often in rural settings. The study also revealed that visitors ranked "walking or hiking" as the most popular activity to do in state parks, supporting the need for a well-maintained trail system.

In 2009, the State of MD developed a Trails Strategic Implementation Plan (TSIP), tapping expertise from the MD Dept of Transportation, MD Dept of Natural Resources, MD Dept of Business and Economic Development, MD Dept of Health and Mental Hygiene, and numerous other agencies. The TSIP identifies a cadre of community needs that presently exist, such as transportation, recreation and quality of life, public health and fitness, access to nature and education, and economic development (especially heritage and eco-tourism). The TSIP presents strategies for addressing those needs, the success of which depend a great deal on trails and public lands managed by MPS.

The trail work done by MCC in MD state parks directly impacts MD's ability to implement its longterm trail plan and meet these pressing community needs. Trails through parks are especially relevant in terms of supporting local economies. As the TSIP points out, "Trail users and tourists contribute to local economies through spending at: restaurants, hotels, and stores, which in turn can help revitalize and attract businesses, create jobs, and increase public revenue. Trails also have been associated with increased property values in several studies and are the most desirable outdoor amenity for prospective

Narratives

homebuyers, according to the National Association of Home Builders."

The TSIP also highlights the significant impact that the Base Realignment and Closure Act (BRAC) will have on MD over the next decade, bringing 40,000 to 60,000 new workers into the state. Trail work is an important smart growth project that will enhance abilities of local communities to absorb this rapid growth.

But population increase and human overuse are not the only threats to ecosystems in our state. MCC is currently protecting the cherished old-growth hemlock forests in the mountains of western MD. These trees have been revered for their beauty, and for the unique natural ecosystem they support, for many years. But in the past decade, the eastern hemlock tree has come under attack from an insect known as the hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA). Once these tiny creatures infest it, they can kill a centuries-old tree within a few growing seasons.

Throughout the eastern U.S., the hemlock is dying out. The eastern hemlock is a "foundation" species, which means that it has a major influence on forest structure and functional processes. When a hemlock tree dies, the forest loses more than a tree; it loses its very ability to support many other species of flora and fauna that depend on the hemlock for their survival.

MCC is a major partner in the HWA Initiative, a program of the USDA Forest Service, in partnership with a host of other organizations including 28 federal and state agencies, 24 universities, 7 institutions in China and Japan, and numerous private industries. Since 2010, MCC is the primary partner in Maryland, performing the labor-intensive service of individually injecting each tree with chemicals to protect the tree from HWA infestation. MCC members have been trained in administration of this chemical injection, and the detailed recordkeeping necessary to tag and document every tree that is treated. Research continues on ways to deter the HWA, including the introduction of predator species that will naturally control the HWA. However, this long-term research is years from being applicable in MD. MCC's current work is critical as a means to protect these sensitive habitats in the meantime, and preserve trees for future generations to enjoy.

1.b. AMERICORPS MEMBERS AS HIGHLY EFFECTIVE MEANS TO SOLVE COMMUNITY PROBLEMS:

Narratives

To address these needs, MCC will engage 35 full-time youth conservation corps members. These members will be placed in 7 crews at state parks in MD. Members will serve approximately 40 hours each week from October to September.

Each crew will work with public land managers to identify needed public land improvement and resource restoration projects. Member activities will include the removal of invasive species, native plant installations, building riparian buffers, restoring wildlife habitat, repairing and building trails, planting bay grasses, controlling erosion into the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, and managing and reducing impacts on the environment from human use.

All crews will convene at least twice each year to work on large-scale projects. A recent example of this is the ambitious, multi-year effort of MCC (in partnership with the MD Department of Agriculture) to preserve stately old-growth hemlock trees in western MD. The efforts of MCC are saving these trees from being fatally infested by the hemlock woolly adelgid. Since 2011, MCC members have treated over 9,000 trees in a labor-intensive injection process that requires each tree be individually treated, tagged and monitored.

In the 3-year grant period, MCC members will provide direct service activities and participate in mobilizing and supporting volunteers. MCC crews will partner with groups such as the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, National Aquarium, Tidewater Ecosystem Assessment, and Wildlife and Fisheries, and Conservation Jobs Corps (CJC), mobilizing volunteers from local communities on projects such as: trail repair and construction, stream and wetland water quality and habitat data collection; shoreline restoration; and planting native wetland shrubs, trees, and bay grasses. MCC members will train community volunteers to maintain restoration areas and monitor and measure results. This will ensure the long-term sustainability of projects after their completion.

Members work with schools throughout MD to leverage student volunteer service, by planning and leading conservation projects where students can complete their service learning hours. In addition, members will plan and supervise conservation service projects undertaken by groups of disadvantaged youth in the Conservation Jobs Corps (CJC). MCC members supervise CJC projects for 6 weeks each summer, leveraging approximately 54,000 hours of service annually, which would not be possible without MCC supervision and coordination.

Narratives

MD's public lands benefit from having AmeriCorps members from all over the U.S. who bring with them fresh perspectives and ideas. In addition, their youth and enthusiasm is a powerful motivator, inspiring others to serve in ways that regular employees could never do. They come to a project bearing their AmeriCorps logo proudly on their sleeve, and their pride in service is infectious.

Environmental work lends itself to participants who are young, physically strong and emotionally connected to and passionate about the environment, and an AmeriCorps crew fits that bill perfectly. As leaders of student service projects, and working with young CJC crews of disadvantaged youth age 14 - 17, young AmeriCorps members are uniquely equipped to be effective role models in the field, given that they are so close in age to the volunteers they lead.

MCC's structure allows members to contribute on a local level, forming relationships within their specific communities, while also belonging to a program with a statewide identity, one that allows crews to come together periodically on projects with statewide impact. MCC members often aspire to careers in the outdoors, and many have at least some college education in the field. This academic background improves their judgment and supports their ability to plan and execute projects in environmentally sensitive areas.

MCC crews benefit from having park rangers assigned as supervisors, who oversee their progress and plan activities on a daily basis. Other park staff members share decades of institutional knowledge with MCC and often pitch in to help MCC crews complete projects. MCC has access to a host of state resources that enable the program to provide excellent training and support all year.

Young members benefit from the nature of the service itself (frequently cited MCC benefits are the hands-on nature of the environmental projects and the opportunity to work with students), the intensive training program, the AmeriCorps Education Award, student loan forbearance for some, professional connections to other members and AmeriCorps programs, and the ability to accomplish tangible results within the AmeriCorps term of service.

1.c. EVIDENCE-BASED/EVIDENCE-INFORMED AND MEASURABLE COMMUNITY IMPACT:
The services provided by MCC directly address the need for interventions that 1) improve and restore

Narratives

MD's stressed public lands and 2) improve and create recreational trails on MD's public lands. DNR wildlife biologists, foresters, park managers, and other resource professionals identify environmental problems and priorities and develop AmeriCorps member interventions that address these issues. All member service activities occur in the context of an environmental plan for the local area to be served. Member supervisors oversee all activities to ensure they are appropriate, effective, and efficient. Resource restoration and park improvement projects undertaken by MCC are requested by public land managers with extensive training, education, and experience in determining and applying best management practices for wildlife habitat improvement, trail repair, and erosion control.

When projects require further expertise, MCC has access to the MPS environmental review process, and other specialized units within DNR (e.g. Fisheries staff, Foresters and Wildlife biologists), who provide direction on best management practices supported by decades of evidence-based data. For example, Fisheries experts design fish stocking plans for MCC, and Chesapeake and Coastal Watershed Services provides expertise on conducting and analyzing results of stream surveys.

Performance measure targets for the 3-year grant period outlined in this application were determined using prior years' data. MCC will track and evaluate progress toward meeting and achieving these performance measures through a weekly, monthly, and quarterly reporting system. MCC crew supervisors will submit weekly reports to headquarters along with their monthly calendar schedules. MCC staff members will report quarterly and annually to the state commission.

To monitor site satisfaction, MCC staff will administer and review Project Evaluation Surveys as part of continuous program improvement. Surveys will ask public land managers to assess the conditions of individual project sites before and after MCC interventions take place. By the end of the 3-year grant cycle, 210 projects will receive a minimum of a one-grade improvement as determined by the public land manager, as a result of AmeriCorps/MCC interventions. The results of these surveys will be shared with crew supervisors for performance feedback.

MCC has a great track record of success in these areas. Since 1994, over 650 MCC members have successfully completed their AmeriCorps terms of service. Since 2004, MCC has mobilized over 23,000 volunteers to perform over 261,000 hours of service. In that same period, MCC has repaired or created 1,592 miles of trails and planted 45,000 trees, protecting over 1,000 acres of land along the

Narratives

tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay. MCC has improved 40,136 acres of wildlife habitat, planted 127,000 bay grasses, and protected 269 miles of streams. MCC has made 717 improvements to park facilities and protected 9,000 hemlock trees from HWA infestation.

1.d. MEMBER RECRUITMENT:

MCC member recruitment will rely heavily on the MCC website to attract diverse candidates from all over the country for the full-time corps. MCC will also post service opportunities on the CNCS My AmeriCorps website to promote service opportunities in MD. Enrollment in the 2011-2012 program year included 26 out of 50 full-time members who moved from another state to serve in MD. This is a fairly typical ratio for the program.

MCC's Assistant Program Manager will screen all applications from potential members for CNCS eligibility criteria and MCC qualifications. Upon successful screening, applications will be forwarded to a crew supervisor for follow-up. In-person interviews will be conducted for local applicants. For out-of-state candidates, interviews will be conducted by phone, and may require numerous discussions before a final decision is made. MCC has a strong record of local recruitment, often drawing from the communities that surround the parks where full-time MCC crews are stationed. Since 2008, MCC has been able to expand its geographic reach to include disadvantaged youth in urban areas through its affiliation with the CJC summer youth program. Summer youth participants who express a particular interest in the natural resources field, or otherwise distinguish themselves through their service, will be recruited for participation in MCC's full-time corps.

1.e. MEMBER TRAINING:

MCC members receive a minimum of 166 hours of training, providing the skills and knowledge members need in order to perform their service. This training includes a 2-day (16 hrs) orientation attended by every member and crew supervisor to orient to AmeriCorps, MCC and specific park sites. CNCS prohibited activities will be discussed at length, and be emphasized by crew supervisors after training. All member contracts and orientation and training materials will contain detailed descriptions of the AmeriCorps prohibited activities and include the consequences of failure to abide by the program rules and regulations.

MCC training also includes, but is not limited to: Trail Maintenance and Construction (16 hrs),

Narratives

GIS/Mapping (8 hrs), Water Quality Testing (4 hrs), Emergency Medical First Responder (48 hrs), Chainsaw Use and Safety (24 hrs), Driver Training and Radio Communication (6 hrs), Interpretive Training (20 hrs), Scales and Tales (8 - 40 hrs, depending on site), and Wildland Firefighting Certification (16 - 40 hrs).

This training regimen prepares MCC AmeriCorps members to carry out their routine service safely and proficiently. It also allows them to serve as volunteer trainers and leaders in times of natural disasters or other emergencies. MCC's training allows the program to provide communities and public lands across the state with disaster relief and public safety response activities. If needed during the grant period, these activities will be directed by the MD Emergency Management Agency, pending approval of the state commission. In recent years, MCC has been instrumental in making state parks and other public lands safe and accessible after the 2010 and 2011 blizzards, as well as after Tropical Storms Irene and Lee in 2011, and Hurricane Sandy in 2012, by removing hazardous trees from roadways and trails.

1.f. MEMBER SUPERVISION:

Crews of 5 members will be led by crew supervisors. Crew supervisors are MPS Park Rangers who are selected through a collaborative process between MCC and land managers at the crew sites. MCC will seek out crew supervisors who have demonstrated excellent teamwork and leadership skills, as well as enthusiasm, positive attitude, and a personal affinity for the work of environmental stewardship. All crew supervisors must be employed by the state, and have at least some level of prior experience working in the natural resource field. New crew supervisors will be asked to shadow an experienced crew supervisor, typically for 1 program year, before taking over the role. Once in the role, they will be required to attend a 2-day staff training as well as quarterly MCC staff meetings over the course of the year. These meetings will provide direction on AmeriCorps requirements and prohibited activities. Crew supervisors will also receive guidance and direction from the MCC Program Manager and Assistant Program Manager through regular on-site visits and daily phone or email communication.

1.g. MEMBER EXPERIENCE:

THE POWER OF SERVICE: Several key components of the MCC program ensure members have a powerful experience, one that will translate into a meaningful impact on them as well as on the community. The team-based crew structure of the program is perhaps one of the most powerful tools

Narratives

in this regard. Each crew enjoys "pride of place" in the parks from which they operate, giving them a tangible sense of belonging to a community and a connection to each other. Stationed in MD state parks, they are surrounded every day by the concrete presence of environmental resources in need of stewardship. This keeps the MCC mission front and center, enhancing their identity as AmeriCorps members with a very specific sense of purpose.

In addition to the crew-based structure, MCC will also "cross-pollinate" when multiple crews partner on tasks with statewide impact. Examples include annual spring and fall statewide projects and Bay restoration projects. MCC is known for its esprit de corps. New recruits often cite its reputation as a positive, affirming program as a key factor in their decision to apply. MCC fosters an atmosphere of teamwork, encouraging corps members to come together and learn from one another.

Other key factors in member satisfaction include the diversity of service experiences offered by the program, as well as the rigorous, quality training agenda. Members also benefit from the opportunity to network with an array of natural resource professionals, which has led to many career opportunities for AmeriCorps graduates. In the last 3 program years, 10 members have been hired on as full-time park rangers with the MD Park Service. Another was hired as a full-time officer with the MD Natural Resources Police. Many other members have obtained employment and career opportunities in the environmental field.

The program has a strong track record in encouraging continued civic participation. The impact on MCC members who serve is significant and often transformational. In the last 3 years, 20 members have gone on to careers in the environmental field. Others have gone on to work for agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Aquarium, MD Department of Agriculture, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and MD Department of Housing and Community Development. And at least 6 members have found private sector work in the environmental field working on oil spill clean-ups, pipeline inspections, etc.

At least 12 former members are pursuing post-graduate degrees in Environmental Science, Sustainability, Environmental Law, Animal Care, Agriculture, Crop Science, Forestry, Parks and Recreation, and GIS Mapping. MCC has a diverse member population, and their career choices post-MCC reflect this. In addition to the many who have gone on to work in the environmental field,

Narratives

others have gone on to become teachers, architects, civil engineers, organic farmers, welders, and EMTs. And 6 MCC alumni have served in other AmeriCorps programs around the country, including the Echo Lake Aquarium and Science Center in Vermont and the Washington Conservation Corps.

For some members, the AmeriCorps and MCC experience has caused them to change their life direction. One member received a full scholarship to pursue both her Master's degree and PhD in Engineering at Cornell University. However, her time with MCC caused her to re-evaluate, and she is currently seeking full-time employment with the MD Natural Resources Police. Another member obtained her B.S. in Psychology, but MCC caused her to change course. She is now working for the Audubon Society and pursuing her Master's degree in Environmental Science.

1.h. VOLUNTEER GENERATION:

MCC members will work with 1,000 community volunteers across MD each program year. From retired carpenters and engineers to school teachers, students and disadvantaged youth, park volunteers are eager to support community access to healthy and safe outdoor recreation. MCC members will recruit, train, and organize volunteers to provide trail maintenance training, develop and provide interpretive park programs for youth and adults, and restore wildlife and aquatic habitats.

1.i. ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT TO AMERICORPS IDENTIFICATION:

The AmeriCorps identity is extremely prominent in the MCC program. Every member is made aware of MCC's AmeriCorps status as an AmeriCorps program during recruitment; and information is included in the member position description. The AmeriCorps logo is prominent on all MCC gear. Logos are displayed on the crew's state vehicles, at the service sites, on the website, and in recruitment brochures. Members are introduced to AmeriCorps, its structure, and policies in the mandatory initial orientation. The connection with AmeriCorps continues through the program year. MCC partners regularly with other AmeriCorps programs, including the MD Institute College of Art, Civic Works, and AmeriCorps NCCC on projects such as community gardens and murals in Baltimore City, bay restoration, and disaster response across the state. Each year MCC crews engage in service projects to celebrate the MLK holiday and are actively involved in National AmeriCorps Week.

Organizational Capability

2.a. ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND AND STAFFING:

MCC's mission is to "provide corps members with opportunities to serve the public, and grow

Narratives

personally and professionally through conservation service." The proposed AmeriCorps budget represents 37% of MCC's total budget, with the remaining 63% being funded by the MD Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The primary contact for the grant application is Peyton Taylor, MCC Executive Director. The secondary contact is Marti Woodfield, MCC Program Manager.

MD's DNR has managed MCC since its inception in 1984. The program's affiliation with DNR provides access to a Fiscal Services Administration that directs and oversees the program's fiscal, administrative, and auditing procedures at the highest level of federal grant compliance.

MCC staff has over 50 years of AmeriCorps managerial experience. Crew supervisors lead members in their daily member interventions and training, and monitor and evaluate progress of member activities. Crew supervisors submit weekly reports, monthly calendars, and quarterly performance data into an Excel-based MCC reporting system.

MCC's Executive Director, a DNR employee, oversees program implementation and compliance with AmeriCorps guidelines and MD policies; establishes the vision and direction of the program; formulates improvement strategies and special initiatives; identifies and seeks operational resources. The current Executive Director has been with DNR for 27 years, with 20 years of management experience; she has a B.S. in Natural Resource Management and a Master's degree in Liberal Arts. The MCC Program Manager reports to the Executive Director, functioning as the liaison to the MCC crew supervisors, land managers, and other natural resource professionals. This position plans and facilitates MCC projects and visits crews regularly in the field. The current Program Manager has 20 years of MCC management experience and helped implement the AmeriCorps program in 1994.

The Program Administrative Assistant conducts all of the program's procurement, billing, health insurance processing, timesheet processing, and financial tracking. This position also oversees quarterly AmeriCorps financial reporting, grant closeout, and member file management.

The Assistant Program Manager is responsible for recruiting MCC members, supporting the field staff and members, organizing trainings and projects, and assisting with AmeriCorps reporting. The current Assistant Program Manager has 17 years of managerial experience with the AmeriCorps program.

Narratives

MCC has a strong advantage in financial management capacity due to support from DNR. As a state agency, MCC's fiscal accountability is supported by DNR's financial management system and subject to regular auditing. MCC's Executive Director and Program Manager are designated by the state to oversee the program's fiscal management.

These administrative professionals work with state accountants and auditors to continue sound financial operations of the program. DNR has a grant compliance unit that is responsible for monitoring all federal grants awarded to the agency. The agency's federal grants, including the MCC AmeriCorps grant program, are annually audited under the OMB A-133 requirements.

MCC's contribution to MD communities has been celebrated since the program's inception. To date, MCC has graduated 650 AmeriCorps members. Over the years, MCC's contributions to the state have been formally recognized in a number of ways at the local, state, and national level. MCC has been recognized with a Governor's Service Award, 2 Governor's Citations, a MD Park Service Superintendent's Commendation, a MD Forestry Director's Commendation, a Governor's Citation for Excellence, and many individual awards and certificates of appreciation from the Corps Network. MCC also received an Exemplary Conservation Project Award for its Stream Corridor Assessment Monitoring Services.

Many partners support the MCC program through state resources and/or grant funds. For example, the Chesapeake Bay Trust funds Living Shoreline projects that are completed by MCC. The MD State Highway Administration administers federal Recreation Trail grants. Through this diverse financial portfolio, the MCC program continues to exceed a 50% match to its federal AmeriCorps grant.

MCC has enjoyed a 29-year partnership with DNR as its managing agency and source of match funds and in-kind support. This partnership is strengthened each year through ongoing collaboration and creative strategic planning. DNR staff appreciates the capabilities of the MCC program to mobilize local communities and volunteers, and provide talented, dedicated members in the field to complete conservation projects. MCC is well known throughout MD. Its stakeholders are varied in their missions, purpose, and partnerships with MCC.

2.b. SUSTAINABILITY:

Narratives

DIVERSIFIED FUNDING: In the next grant cycle, MCC projects will be supported by commitments from a diverse set of agencies and programs including YouthWorks, Baltimore City Recreation and Parks, Chesapeake Bay Trust, and Worcester County Public Schools. Program operations and health insurance costs will be supported in part by grants from the National Recreation Trails Program for the maintenance and improvement of recreation trails. These local, state, and national resources allow MCC to provide a 66% grantee match in the 2013-2014 grant year.

COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS AND INVESTMENT: Environmental conservation projects rely on long-term follow-up care in order to ensure survivability (e.g. reforested sites need watering and weeding; dune replenishment projects need fencing; trail projects require ongoing maintenance). MCC's involvement and training of volunteers is designed to ensure that stewardship of a community's natural and cultural resources continues following the completion of projects. Volunteer training provides the skills and knowledge necessary to maintain sites and monitor restoration goals in the long-term after project completion.

MCC is recognized by MD organizations as an important youth conservation service program, and is in demand as a source of assistance in the community. Program staff work with stakeholders and partners to prioritize and schedule service. As needs are identified, MCC crews and supervisors work with the organization to develop specific action plans and implement projects. Projects can involve months of pre-planning and support, such as recruiting and leading volunteers for a major 2-week bay grass planting to providing state park volunteers with trail maintenance training needs.

MCC will collaborate with 3,000 volunteers during the 2013-2016 grant period (approximately 1,000 per year). Many of these volunteers will be episodic in nature; however, a significant body of volunteers will be regular, ongoing participants. These volunteers will typically be recruited from communities surrounding state parks. Community leaders will work with MCC members to recruit volunteers for conservation projects.

MCC members will provide expertise in training, leading, and mobilizing volunteers for project events. MCC also spends a good deal of time on youth and student volunteerism. Youth volunteers are generated through the MCC education and interpretation program, which collaborates with 150 school teachers on MD's Eastern Shore to provide educational programming by MCC members. In

Narratives

addition, MCC will supervise projects that engage 300 youth participants from the Maryland Conservation Jobs Corps (CJC) for a six-week period in the summer. CJC is a program for disadvantaged youth age 14 - 17. Each year they assist MCC in the completion of a significant number of improvements of public lands. CJC members alone contribute approximately 54,000 hours of service annually, which would not be possible without MCC to plan and lead that service.

MCC engages citizens through hands-on participation in projects that improve and restore public lands. MCC's ability to motivate and mobilize citizens is well-documented over the decades. As AmeriCorps participants themselves, they have a special ability to connect with citizens and inspire service in others. They lead by example. By working with hundreds of young people, MCC helps to ensure that future generations will remain engaged as stewards of our natural resources.

2.c. COMPLIANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY:

To monitor compliance with fiscal and programmatic requirements, MCC will use the following systems to identify issues as well as strengths and weaknesses: centralized administrative and fiscal grant compliance oversight; analysis of the budget through quarterly financial reports; regular liaison communication between field and headquarters program staff; and weekly field inputs via progress reports. MCC's Program Manager will maintain statewide program oversight in coordination with park managers who oversee MCC crew supervisors. The Program Manager will conduct routine site visits and meet with park managers and crew supervisors to identify and resolve issues.

The program's overall progress will be continually assessed through the MCC Activity Reporting System, an evaluation model comprised of Weekly Activity Reports that capture quantitative program outcome data. Project Evaluation Surveys allow project sponsors to rate program quality. Member interviews will enlist front-line input at the beginning, mid-point, and end of the service year.

Preventing and detecting compliance issues will begin with MCC's initial program orientation, where CNCS prohibited activities will be thoroughly covered. This will continue through the year as MCC staff provides close supervision as does a full-time supervisor for each crew of 5 members.

If compliance problems are encountered, they will be immediately addressed. Crew supervisors will notify the MCC Program Manager if this occurs, and the Program Manager will work with the

Narratives

Executive Director to address serious infractions. In the last 3 years, there have been no compliance issues among the corps members. In the future, if compliance issues are suspected, MCC staff will investigate them fully and work together to take quick action. Each case would generate a full review and interviews of members and sites, with members being released from service for cause if necessary.

MCC has a strong record of compliance. In the current grant cycle, the program has not had any programmatic or fiscal management compliance findings, and staff have adapted well to the demands of the eGrants Portal and reporting requirements from the Governor's Office on Service and Volunteerism. In terms of Portal compliance, 98% of members in the 2009, 2010, and 2011 program years were entered in the Portal within 30 days. And in the last 2 completed program years, 95% of members were exited within 30 days.

ENROLLMENT AND RETENTION: The enrollment rate for the 2011 program year was 70%, a drop from the program's 88.2% enrollment rate in 2010. This drop is an anomaly; MCC has a high enrollment rate throughout the program's history with AmeriCorps (with an average enrollment of over 93% for the 4 years prior). The 2011 enrollment rate reflected a decrease in enrollment in the minimum-time EAO positions. MCC worked with a partner organization in 2011 to recruit and enroll EAO members. This partner organization underwent restructuring mid-year which subsequently eliminated the EAO member enrollment. After feedback from the MD Governor's Office on Service and Volunteerism and a thorough review of the program's history, current structure, and future needs, MCC staff decided to remove EAO slots from the program altogether for the next grant year.

MCC's retention rate was 92.2% for the 2011 program year; this is consistent with the program's 93.6% average retention rate over the last 4 years. Several full-time members left early to pursue careers in the environmental field with opportunities for advancement. To improve enrollment in the next grant year, MCC will emphasize the importance of completing the term of service during member recruitment and expand the training program to include a variety of member development options throughout the year.

OPERATING SITES AND MEMBER SERVICE SITES: 7 sites across the state will serve as host sites for full-time MCC crews in 2013. The sites were chosen based on their locations and proximity to specific problems that need to be addressed in those communities. The parks provide significant

Narratives

infrastructure support to MCC in the performance of their service. In 2013, the sites will include Merkle Wildlife Sanctuary and Assateague, Tuckahoe, Patapsco Valley, Gunpowder Falls, Susquehanna, and New Germany State Parks. Each of these sites is hosting an MCC crew in the current grant year, and is familiar with the needs of the program. Each has demonstrated an ability to accommodate those needs.

Because MCC program activities address issues relating to the environment, and also serve children and disadvantaged youth, the program qualifies for special consideration under AmeriCorps regulations 45 CFR 2522.475 and 45 CFR 2522.450.

Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy

3.a. COST EFFECTIVENESS:

DNR and the MD Park Service have supported the full-time leadership and supervisory staff of the MCC program for 29 years. As a mandated program created by the MD General Assembly in 1984, MCC is considered a high priority of DNR. Virtually every unit has recognized the value of MCC in enhancing the agency's capacity to work with local communities, volunteers, and nonprofit organizations to achieve MD's environmental goals.

MCC is supported by a diverse number of non-federal funding sources, which benefit directly from MCC program activities on a fee-for-service or grant basis. The MD Park Service has supported the staff costs associated with the MCC program for 29 years. Additional funding sources include the Chesapeake Bay Trust and the Governor's Office on Accessibility, which supports MCC work on park improvements for disabled visitors. MCC will receive \$908,481 in cash support from DNR.

The Congressional reauthorization of the National Recreation Trail (NRT) grant program in 2005 specifically called for greater use of grant funds to support AmeriCorps members in serving the nation's trail recreation needs. The NRT grant program has provided MD an average of \$300,000 annually for trail construction, equipment, and tools. These funds have afforded a reliable and consistent source of revenue since 1996; in 2008, the NRT grant program was reauthorized until 2013. The reauthorization of NRT grants will allow these federal funds to also be used as match for the AmeriCorps grant. In the 2013-2016 grant period, NRT grants will allow MCC members to work on park trails, helping to support full-time members' living allowances and health care costs.

Narratives

MCC's cost per MSY will be \$13,271 in 2013. The funds requested to support the full-time positions in 2013-2014 reflect an increase of \$4,004 per MSY as compared to the last grant year the program was funded. This increase is due to 3 reasons: the costs of increased requirements for criminal history checks, increased health insurance cost, and the elimination of minimum-time EAO slots. The EAO slot request was eliminated in order to "right-size" the program and best balance the needs of the youth participants with the paid staff who support them.

3.b. BUDGET ADEQUACY:

The proposed budget will provide adequate funding to cover all operational and member support costs needed to run a strong program. The budgeted costs reflect the experience of 18 years of AmeriCorps grant administration and program implementation, and 29 years of managing the MCC program. The program has continually reviewed its accomplishments and areas of need in the communities that it serves. Because much is expected of MCC members, and because of the high cost of living in many parts of MD, MCC exceeds the minimum member living allowance allowable by CNCS. MCC fulltime members receive a living allowance of \$12,325. This living allowance has allowed MCC to attract talented corps members and retain, on average, 94% of members each year (based on the last 4 program years). As noted throughout the narrative, these members have a strong track record of success in meeting MD's environmental needs.

Operational funding is specifically targeted to support the program's most costly elements: member training, travel, and vehicle maintenance. These operational expenses are critical to providing service learning opportunities that equip MCC members with the skills and knowledge to perform their service safely and effectively. An excellent network of support will surround the investment of AmeriCorps dollars in MCC with donated staff, services, materials, and expertise provided from local, state, regional, and federal nonprofit and government agencies. Finally, MCC will continue to work with the national Corps Network to support the members' health care program in a cost effective way and access additional program resources throughout the grant period.

Evaluation Summary or Plan

In 2007, MCC underwent a thorough assessment and program evaluation by the national Corps Network, an outside organization. The program earned an Excellence in Corps Operations (ECO) award. The national corps community recognized the MCC as an ECO Corps for demonstrating a commitment to high-quality standards and continuous improvement. The ECO award rates a

Narratives

program's effective practices, purpose and activities, organization and management, program design, corps member development, work experience, service projects, and evidence of success.

MCC's strengths include its partnership with DNR, its crew-based structure, and its unique opportunities for young AmeriCorps members to engage in conservation service that has a direct impact on improving the fragile ecosystem of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. And, finally, MCC provides an extraordinarily powerful service opportunity and a proven launch pad for members to go on to successful careers in the natural resources field. MCC submitted this evaluation report to the MD Governor's Office on Service and Volunteerism.

Amendment Justification

N/A

Clarification Summary

N/A

Continuation Changes

N/A