

APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

2014 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Application ID: 14AC157080

Program Name: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

For the purpose of enhancing our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), we are providing specific feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this application. These comments are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment; rather the analysis represents those elements that had the greatest bearing on the rating of the application. Please note that this feedback consists of summary comments from more than one reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem to be inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

Reviewers' Summary Comments:

Strengths:

The applicant clearly connected the needs for the project with data specific to Montana in regards to low-income students, volunteerism at parks, obesity, and physical exercise.

The applicant provides clear data for both the need for educational programs within the parks during the school year and summer breaks.

The applicant presents a satisfactory portrait of the need to protect, enhance, and restore parklands due to insufficient state funding.

The applicant describes the amount of parkland in the state and the lack of funding for the state compared to the rest of the country and, therefore, addressing the need for volunteer support.

The applicant establishes the need for park land improvement by stating there is a \$2 million backlog of park land improvement projects and the staffing and budgeting to manage Montana's 54 state parks ranks 47th and 49th respectively (NASPD, 2012, Statistical Report of State Park Operations: 2010:2012).

The applicant describes the link between a gap in learning in the summer and a decrease in skills such as mathematics with students where they can lose up to two months of grade equivalency demonstrating the prevalence of the program and the need for solutions in Montana, particularly among lower income students.

The application describes the severe need for education and interpretation projects by citing a 2102 study reporting that only 16% of Montana's students have access to outdoor and nature education programs (Obery, the Scope of Nature and Outdoor Education in Montana).

Applicant established the problem of children's limited exposure to outdoor activities and education, as well as the

summer learning loss with sufficient non-experimental studies.

The applicant indicates a need for community outreach activities in order to raise awareness about the health benefits of spending time in nature and creating partnerships between parks departments, school districts, and nature centers by referencing the American Public Health Association's 2013 Policy Statements.

The applicant's identified problem of poor health and obesity is adequately supported by relevant Centers for Disease Control (CDC) findings and validated by its Montana research subjects.

The applicant cites grant reports and research collected within the project to support the chosen interventions.

The applicant uses multiple sources related to different aspects of the project providing adequate justification for the project, including Corporation for National and Community Service research on the health benefits of volunteering.

The role of AmeriCorps members in achieving the goals of the project is clearly documented in the logic model and narrative.

AmeriCorps members are essential in addressing the crucial staffing shortages at state parks. AmeriCorps members' community outreach efforts have sustained and increased the number of volunteers, which are vital to accomplishing the applicant's intervention activities. Two surveys of state park managers indicated that the efforts of AmeriCorps members at their sites resulted in the improvement of park lands.

AmeriCorps members forge new partnerships and strengthen existing relationships, which are imperative to implementation of these intervention inputs to improve state park lands, provide educational enrichment opportunities, and promote nature and outdoor recreation programs.

Each of the applicant's program components are described well in the Theory of Change and there is a well-defined relationship between what it is identifying as its inputs, activities and outputs with the outcomes, particularly the short-term and medium-term outcomes. For example, the applicant's land improvement work describes the short-term outcomes of physically restoring the land and then demonstrates (through feedback from the park managers) how these short-term outcomes should lead to the medium-term outcomes of the park managers' improvement in the land based on the AmeriCorps members' and volunteers' activities and outputs.

The applicant will collect important feedback from program participants (particularly the education and interpretation program component) on the impact of program itself on the participant and how it can make improvements in the future.

The Members appear to be a highly effective means to solve community problems as evidenced by the alignment of needs, activities, outputs, and outcomes presented in the logic model.

The logic model clearly states the number and types of Members, who will conduct activities in each of the four identified need areas: land improvement, education and interpretation, volunteer capacity building, and community outreach.

The logic model describes the specific Member activities and outputs for each of the identified activities. For example, 20 Members will provide land improvement, such as native plant restoration, invasive species management, and trail construction and site restoration, for an average of 20 acres improved per site at 18 state parks.

The expected short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes support the presented Theory of Change. The long-term effects of having restored, protected, and accessible public lands; engaged volunteers; and established community partnerships will encourage healthy, active, and environmentally aware communities.

The applicant outlines a comprehensive plan for intervention by AmeriCorps members that seems reasonable.

Activities are specific and well-aligned with projected outcomes.

The applicant surpassed target goals in participant surveys and improved land.

The applicant exceeded its goals for park improvement and greatly exceeded its goals of collecting interpretive and educational surveys.

In the first two years, AmeriCorps members exceeded their goal for improving state park lands by over 300% (840 acres vs. 260 acre goal); collected 1,640 interpretative and educational surveys, 740 more than its goal of 900 surveys; and conducted over 400 educational programs, which engaged 6,500 youth and 3,000 adults.

The applicant reports success in solving each of the identified community needs, and they have exceeded all targets over the last two years. For example, during the program's first two years, the program improved 840 acres of park land surpassing their goal of 260 acres; provided over 400 education programs, engaging over 6,500 youth and 3,000 adults; recruited 975 volunteers, increasing volunteer participation by 14%; and completed nearly 700 community outreach activities.

The applicant demonstrates two years of outstanding past performance that exceeds targeted outcomes of number of improved acres of land, community outreach programs, completed participant surveys, internal evaluation measurements, and changes in attitudes and behavior.

The applicant reports an annual increase in the number of park managers, 13 and 16 respectively, reporting that AmeriCorps efforts resulted in the improvement of park land.

Weaknesses:

The applicant uses multiple sources to stress the important health benefits of public spaces, but does not provide data to support the health benefits beyond physical activity.

In describing the need, the applicant cites the Statistical Report of Park Operation: 2010-2012, which states that the state operates 54 state parks in 26 counties; however, quantitative data is not provided in the narrative to ascertain the severity of the need, other than the \$2 million maintenance backlog. Data is not provided on the number of parks on the state maintenance backlog, miles of trails or number of park facilities needing restoration.

The data the applicant correlates for the need for volunteers is based on what Montana residents prefer and not on the actual need in its park system.

The applicant cites a 2010 study conducted by the Bureau of Business and Economic Research to illustrate that Montana residents showed a preference for an increase in the use of volunteers in parks. This does not demonstrate the need for more volunteers.

The applicant claims that more volunteers are needed in the Montana park system, but does not fully explain why the current level of volunteer involvement is insufficient.

The applicant provides a general overview of the state park system needs; therefore, they do not delineate the unique needs of specific state parks.

The applicant's data supporting the problems of park staffing and budget limitations is restricted to the number of state parks and national ranking of budget size, but no comparative data is provided with respect to land mass (square acres).

The applicant provides no supporting data regarding the need for land improvement other than listing pending maintenance projects. The connection of these improvement projects to actual problems of land deterioration is unclear.

The applicant does not provide specific or relevant data to document a need for the disaster response focus area.

The applicant does not adequately describe the disaster response component of the proposed program in the narrative.

The applicant did not provide adequate detail about the results of many of the studies cited.

The logic model and narrative described collecting interpretive and educational surveys in previous years and plans to collect surveys again in future activities, but does not indicate whether there was/is a pre-test for participants to gauge more than satisfaction.

The applicant does not collect data directly from the K-12 students about their interest and engagement in outdoor activities to assess outcomes.

The logic model describes intervention activities at 18 of the 54 state parks; however, the logic model does not identify site locations. Because state parks are located throughout 26 counties, AmeriCorps members' effectiveness in implementing intervention activities could be hindered if park sites are far apart.

The applicant does not specify in which of the state's 18 out of 54 state parks members will serve to illustrate the specific geographic areas impacted by the proposed project.

The Logic Model does delineate the dosage of inputs, but the duration is omitted.

The applicant does not specify which parks or geographic region will be targeted for the intervention, or offer a justification for how the parks will be selected.

It is not clear how building community partnerships will lead to the proposed outcomes and how awareness, for example, will be measured.

It is unclear how much the applicant surpassed its volunteer goals from previous years.

The outcomes cited in past performance are not clearly linked to the interventions. For example, data that health improvement could be seen from their activities was lacking from the application.

The number of surveys was stated differently in two sections – 1,625 in Education and Interpretation and 1,640 in past performance and no explanation was provided to explain the difference. Survey data was positive, but pre-intervention comparison data was not provided to measure change.

The applicant does not sufficiently explain how, or if, the individuals taking the interpretive and educational studies were impacted and, therefore, not meeting the outcomes.

The applicant states that 85% of staff in the first year and 88% of staff in the second year “strongly agree” or “agree” “have a stronger understanding of the wants and needs of visitors related to the educational and interpretive programming at Montana state parks,” but does not mention a baseline of comparison to help interpret these numbers.

No mention is made of specific improvements to park land or the budgetary impact of member activities.