

# APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

## 2015 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

**Legal Applicant:** Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation

**Application ID:** 15AC167386

**Program Name:** ECO Vermont

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 summary 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 demonstrates the need for water quality improvements efforts based on the Federal Clean Water Act.

The applicant provided strong evidence from reliable sources in identifying the need and aligned their strategies with the federal, state and local strategies.

The applicant presents a clear plan for member training through the programs 3-day orientation and monthly one-day trainings. The applicant learned from Minnesota GreenCorps the importance of a strong training for Members.

The applicant presents a well-designed plan for communicating with their supervisors with check-ins with supervisors and Members, the evaluation process and set expectations through the job descriptions.

The applicant succinctly describes training activities proposed for AmeriCorps members (three-day orientation, bi-monthly training on watershed related issues such as green infrastructure, agricultural best practices and prohibited activities) as well as opportunities to collaborate and network with staff, Topic Leads and other AmeriCorps members during bi-monthly training.

The applicant's training plan is based on the successful model of Minnesota GreenCorps and VHCB AmeriCorps.

The applicant describes some supportive activities (such as monthly check-in conference calls to clarify any AmeriCorps members' concerns and the posting of frequently asked questions on the website) to assist AmeriCorps member supervisors in creating an approachable and caring work environment.

The applicant referenced a 2014 US EPA and Vermont study of the water quality in Lake Champlain and the need to reduce the amount of phosphorus entering the lake. The program will utilize the four suggested abatement strategies to meet its goals of improving the water quality and watershed.

The logic model clearly delineates the inputs and activities that Members will undertake as well as the technical support to be received from local partners. The logic model is relevant to the applicant's theory of change that the placement of 20MSY trained individuals in the highest need regions working collaboratively with local towns and environmental organizations will lead to the achievement of the programs short and long term outcomes.

Utilization of professionals in the different fields relating to abatement of environmental issues as Topic Leads and mentors to AmeriCorps members gives strength to the Member training model and job skills training. The professionals who are being sought will have education and experience in the abatement techniques and know what skills are needed now and in the future for the green jobs that are emerging in Vermont.

The collaborations and partnerships that are described by the applicant with state agencies, nonprofit environmental organizations, and with the Minnesota Green Corps as well as other agencies within the state who have AmeriCorps programs provide extensive and applicable resources for the development of this program and required environmental and member education.

**Weaknesses:**

The application does not sufficiently address when the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the State of Vermont started with the development of the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) limits on phosphorus entering Lake Champlain. It is unclear if the application is at the beginning, mid or end stages of water quality improvements.

The application does not sufficiently describe the level of experience or training for volunteers and member supervisors.

It is unclear whether the five (5) Members green job placement within 30 days after finishing the program are with the agency or another source. Insufficient data is presented to support the remaining Members job placement.

The applicant clearly states the problem as excessive phosphorus in the Lake Champlain watershed and indicates resulting negative impacts to the watershed, such compromising economic development and environmental degradation (toxic algal blooms). However, the applicant does not provide sufficient data to substantiate the existence of excessive phosphorus.

The applicant does not cite the Federal Clean Water Act's standards for phosphorus to verify the impaired classification or provide any data on concentration levels of phosphorus to substantiate the severity of the problem in the 136 affected municipalities.

The applicant's plan for training member supervisors is cursory and lacks details on topics to be covered as well as the frequency and duration of the training. For example, the applicant states that in-person training for host site supervisors will be provided at the beginning of the service term; however, as described, it is unclear whether applicant has allotted sufficient time to train supervisor prior to hosting AmeriCorps members.

Since the applicant is in the process of identifying partnering communities and organizations with whom to work, it is unclear if the areas with the highest need will be able to provide the host organizations to host the AmeriCorps members or that the host organizations will have the human and technical resources available to provide the necessary support to the Members.

The activities outlined in the logic model indicate that AmeriCorps members will recruit, manage 100 community volunteers and coordinate with stakeholders concerning volunteer placement but it is unknown if volunteer recruitment and management are part of the training provided through the collaboration with VT Housing and Conservation Board.

Training for supervisors at host sites about AmeriCorps requirements appears to be insufficient and too dependent on some supervisors having previously been AmeriCorps members. The applicant wants to create good matches

between Members and host sites but doesn't indicate what the elements of a good match are.

The training of site supervisors will be on a one-to one basis but what resources will be utilized for supervisor training are not in evidence. A group training of all supervisors to review AmeriCorps requirements and the OnCorps tracking system is not referenced.

Significant opportunities for AmeriCorps member to reflect and to explore ongoing civic engagement are referenced but insufficient detail and dosage is provided in these areas to be able to discern that these activities will produce the desired results.

The applicant indicates that the AmeriCorps members will connect with AmeriCorps but doesn't indicate what those programs are or how the connections will be made or what service opportunities will be created to build esprit de corps or if Members will be participating in national days of service.

The applicant indicates that Members will feel part of a broader vision and that the root of success is in establishing strong community connections through civic engagement but no program is described to achieve these goals nor is data provided relating to a program with a proven track record that achieves these goals.