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Executive Summary

Conservation Legacy and the Student Conservation Association (SCA) propose to have 89 AmeriCorps members who will complete forest fire mitigation and restoration through fire fuels reduction, pile burning, prescribed burns and fireline construction at ten sites in Arizona, Colorado, Florida, South Dakota, Washington and Wyoming. This Veterans Fire AmeriCorps (VFA) proposal is a re-compete by two of the original three VFA partners with Conservation Legacy serving as a new lead agency. At the end of the first program year, the VFA Program will be responsible for providing 89 veteran AmeriCorps Members with on-the-job training and multiple formal certifications as well as improving 3,200 acres of public lands. The program will primarily focus on the CNCS focus area of Veterans and Military Families. Because of the nature of program activities, Environment -- 21st Century Service Corps is a secondary focus area where the program will demonstrate impact. The CNCS investment of $336,017 will be matched with $1,539,972 in public funding and $50,000 in private funding.

Rationale and Approach/Program Design

PROBLEM/NEED

Although American unemployment numbers have seen improvement, the rate for returning Post-9/11 veterans remains stubbornly higher than that of nonveterans, particularly for the 18-24 age group--a staggering 30.2% (Military Medicine, 179, 10:1053, 2014). This is unacceptable for those who have served our country so well--putting themselves at risk and their futures on hold for us. What's more, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs the Post-9/11 veteran population is projected to increase from 2.4 million in 2013 to 3.4 million in 2018, indicating an increasing number of veterans transitioning from military service. (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, August 2015)

The transition from military service to civilian life should be a smooth one given that veterans possess a strong set of skills, experiences and leadership abilities perfected in the world's best-trained military--attributes that any employer should value. And yet, more than 69% of veterans consider finding a job to be their greatest transitional challenge: only 33% feel they have access to effective transitional support; 60% feel that they need help in translating their skills effectively for a civilian job and 43% say they could benefit from more education. (Veterans' Employment Challenges, Prudential Financial, 2012) Furthermore, unemployment challenges tend to be worse in rural areas according to the Appalachian Journal, Vol. 36, No.3/4--in part because most organizations offering assistance are located in urban areas.
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Chris Martin, veteran and Managing Director of Got Your Six, a veteran's nonprofit campaign, feels there are many negative misconceptions about veterans' employment problems and works to change these mindsets: "We want people to know that we are not a population that requires services. But a population that has services to offer." Once society understands that veterans don't want "help" but do want innovative ways to help themselves, strategies can be designed to tap into the wealth of assets that veterans bring to the employment table.

Veterans need more than just a job to pay the bills. And because they place a high priority on being able to serve, they are most successful when engaged in meaningful jobs that allow them to work in a "service" capacity. Nearly 92% of veterans surveyed (All Volunteer Force, M Yonkman & J Bridgeland, Civic Enterprises, 2009) described public service as important to them and regard it as a "basic responsibility." Many volunteer even while they are still enlisted. It is vital that we channel this wealth of civic responsibility into career fields compatible with their skills and frame successful reintegration as a job that restores the sense of purpose and community felt in the military. This leads to improved overall well-being in veterans.

Over the next 5-10 years the US Forest Service (USFS) will experience a large number of retirements from its workforce--particularly in fire management which requires extensive on-the-job training and formal certification. (Firefighter Workforce & Succession Planning, http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/people/workforce_succession_planning) The USFS, as well as other public lands agencies, needs innovative strategies to build a pool of highly qualified applicants for these positions and to do it efficiently and cost-effectively.

Insects, disease, invasive species, wildfire and drought are all disturbances that affect management of US forests, and future rates of disturbance will also be affected by climate conditions. Projected climate changes--compounded by a legacy of fire suppression that has resulted in dense stands--suggest that western forests will be increasingly affected by large and intense fires. (National Climate Assessment, 2014) The need for fire mitigation strategies will continue to be a priority for the well-being of US forests.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND LOGIC MODEL

Intended Outcomes. Veterans will be able to obtain meaningful jobs leading to careers and continue to serve their country as civilians. Land management agencies will develop a pool of well-qualified applicants to replace a retiring workforce. Forests will become more resistant to threats of wildfire.
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Pre-conditions to the Intended Outcomes. 1) Veterans recognize the value of both pre-AmeriCorps and post-AmeriCorps skills, experience and certifications and are better able to articulate them. 2) Veterans have a stronger sense of purpose, gained through returning to service as AmeriCorps Members and re-establishing strong bonds working side-by-side with other veterans. 3) Veterans regain confidence and self-worth from recognizing that they can protect and impact the environment the same way they protected the country. 4) A high number of veterans move directly into permanent career positions. Many choose to further increase career possibilities through returning to school, using their AmeriCorps education awards. 5) A high number of veterans report increased ability to adjust to civilian life. 6) Forests are more resistant to fire through thinning; pile burning and/or prescribed burning (specific treatments being dependent on weather conditions and other limitations); and fireline construction so that forest fires are less likely to occur and, when they do, are easier to contain at a small scale. 7) Land managers have greater access to well-qualified job candidates.

Specific Intervention. This proposal is a re-compete of an existing AmeriCorps program of Conservation Legacy and the Student Conservation Association (SCA) who feel that collectively they can have a bigger impact the lives of veterans struggling to find pathways for building careers and defining their place in new communities. Each organization will mobilize veterans to complete service projects that are primarily aimed at fire mitigation and that contribute directly to establishing the outcomes listed above. The VFA Program will enlist two of Conservation Legacy’s individual programs to manage forestry projects: Arizona Conservation Corps’ (AZCC) Tucson, AZ office will support veteran crews in Arizona while the Southwest Conservation Corps (SCC) will support crews in Colorado from its Durango, CO and Salida, CO offices. SCA veteran crews will work at seven service sites in Arizona, Colorado, Florida, South Dakota, Washington, and Wyoming.

As AmeriCorps Members, Post-9/11 veterans normally serve in a team-based crew of four to six Members with one to two Crew Leaders depending on crew size. It is possible that the nature of some smaller projects, as determined by land management partners, may not require a full crew, in which case some Members will serve in an individual placement capacity.

Members are selected through an intensive outreach/selection process conducted by each office; they then undergo a rigorous orientation/training process to ensure that they are well-grounded in their new mission objectives and that they have--or learn--the skills necessary to complete specific project assignments. Crews are deployed one to two weeks at a time in a "hitch," camping and working remotely and returning to the office after each hitch to re-supply, re-group, attend to personal needs, debrief and make any project adjustments necessary before beginning the next hitch.
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Eighty-nine Veterans will serve in various terms of service appropriate to their service activities and geographic base. Conservation Legacy will place 30 quarter-time slots, 12 reduced half-time slots and 12 half time slots at three sites in Colorado and Arizona. SCA will place 35 quarter-time slots at seven sites in six states. All VFA Members serve full time within their term of service.

Every VFA project involves a partnership with a land management agency and is dictated by fire management plans and/or policies to ensure the project is meeting a high priority fire management need. Local fire management officers select projects for VFA that meet clearly defined requirements, are appropriate to the conservation corps model, and are worth the financial investment that the land management agency makes in the project to support VFA costs. Specific projects vary by region and agency but generally are focused on fire fuels mitigation to reduce the threat of wildland fires and to make forests more resistant to fires when they occur.

While engaged in accomplishing forest restoration objectives to impact local communities, veteran AmeriCorps Members are themselves the recipients of program benefits. They receive enormous amounts of on-the-job training and experience to build a portfolio of employment assets. What's more, they are coached to recognize the value of their skills (both pre- and post-VFA) and to represent those skills and experience to prospective employers in a positive way on a resume or in an interview. In addition, VFA Members receive very specific formal trainings to with the intent of preparing them for employment opportunities with public lands agencies.

Conservation Legacy and SCA staff work to ensure that all projects are completed on time and to the satisfaction of partners. Through careful and consistent tracking of project milestones such as certifications earned or acres of public lands improved, staff members are able to assess progress towards beneficial Member and environmental outcomes. Staff members administer all AmeriCorps recruiting, training, supervision, compensation and documentation tasks meticulously to ensure that each Member is fully accorded a chance to successfully complete their term of service, have opportunities to build professional resources and establish contacts with agency partners. Each of the many separate projects will build towards the pre-conditions and, ultimately, the overall outcomes of successful reintegration of veterans, establishment of recruitment pools for agency partners and more fire-resistant forests.

EVIDENCE BASE

Since Conservation Legacy and SCA’s initiation of veterans programs, both organizations have achieved significant success in achieving their primary intent: helping veterans reintegrate into the
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civilian world by working in paid service positions that include training for permanent careers. Having a job is central to a sense of well-being—particularly for veterans; and having the opportunity once again to serve their community through environmental conservation adds additional dimensions to the program, including a sense purpose and self-esteem. Program successes have been consistently documented through routine program assessment indicating that of the 327 members enrolled in the VFA program from 2011 through 2015, 166 were able to secure specific to land management; 38 enrolled in education and the rest entered non-land management employment or pursued other goals. In addition, based on the results of post-program surveys, 86% of Members reported that they felt they were better able to adjust to civilian life because of their participation in the VFA Program.

Christine Bellotti, Charlene Laffaye, Kenneth Weingardt, Mark Fischer and Tom Schumacher conducted an outcome study in July 2009, "Re-visioning veteran readjustment: Evaluating outcomes of a green-jobs program," published in the Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, #35 in 2011. The beneficiary population were Post-9/11 veterans enrolled in a green-jobs training program at the Green River Community College in Auburn, WA. Delivering this intervention was the Dept. of WA Veterans Affairs' Veterans Conservation Corps (VCC) whose primary mission is to assist veterans by providing outdoor volunteer opportunities, training and education on natural resources restoration. Participants were ten-month AmeriCorps Members receiving a stipend, who spent three days a week in classroom settings studying natural resources and two days learning on-the-job skills. Limitations of the study include its small size and the absence of a control group, but vocational outcomes were very promising with 16 of 17 Members acquiring employment or going back to school. The VFA program replicates this VCC program closely with the exceptions that training is delivered in more concentrated doses, and on-the-job training is more intensive.

The Mission Continues: A Case Study of the Well After Service Model, published 11/2014 by Oliver Gould, Aaron Scheinberg, and Monica Matthieu, researchers for the Center for a New American Security, is an impact evaluation of 414 veterans (2010-2014) enrolled in a veteran-focused nonprofit, The Mission Continues Fellowship Program. For 26 weeks, fellows volunteer (with a modest stipend) at a nonprofit organization 20 hours a week while also completing a curriculum designed to assist them with reintegration and the pursuit of education or employment. The Fellowship Program focuses on four impacts of service: sense of purpose; stipends/professional development; health benefits of service and social relationships. Veterans experienced improvement in all areas including job prospects: "The program helped them sustain a role of service in their community, transfer military skills to civilian employment, advance their careers and obtain employment." While there are
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some differences in program delivery (VFA is full time within a service term), service is the link that unites both The Mission Continues and VFA outcomes: "Service is core to their [veterans] identity and the way they define purpose in their lives."

Conservation Legacy's VFA proposal will positively impact the lives of the veteran participants as illustrated by past program successes and documented studies of comparable program models. On-the-job-training and externally provided certifications will help them to pave a pathway to future careers, and the opportunity to serve their community through environmental stewardship activities will enable them to continue serving leading to a more successful reintegration to civilian life.

NOTICE PRIORITY

VFA programming fits in the Veterans and Military Family funding priority area because the service activities positively impact the lives of veterans. The program is designed primarily to maximize employment assets in the veteran AmeriCorps Members but also to provide impact in their lives through associated benefits related to 1) an opportunity to serve their community, 2) an opportunity to re-establish bonds with fellow veterans and 3) an opportunity to increase physical fitness through challenging activities. Secondary impacts of the VFA Program fall under Environmental Stewardship; this program is part of the 21st Century Service and Conservation Corps.

MEMBER TRAINING

Intensive member orientation and initial service trainings are conducted by staff and crew leaders and take place in the field replicating actual project conditions; training is scheduled within the first two weeks of service--including most certifications. Topics include an introduction to national service; organizational, partner agency and AmeriCorps policies; program rules (expectations, conduct, drug-free workplace, etc.); safe use of forestry tools; risk management protocols; project management; team building; conflict resolution; goal planning, etc. Project-focused training generally includes the participation of land management partners who detail specific project requirements and help Members gain an understanding of the community impacts of each project.

Members complete approximately four hours of on-going training and education per week done through an experiential approach which may include the following: 1) use of instruments/tools to gather fuels and vegetation data; 2) data use in developing plans for managing vegetated resources; 3) fire mitigation principles (felling trees, thinning stands and slash, and prepping prescribed burn treatment lines); 4) herbicide application; 5) use of clinometers and other forestry equipment; 6)
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GIS/GPS technology use, 7) post-service skills development including resume writing, job search and interviewing skills.

AmeriCorps prohibited activities are covered thoroughly during orientations of both Crew Leaders and Members with frequent reminders on appropriate occasions. SCA Members also reinforce this knowledge through an on-demand online training. On the front end, staff carefully screen position descriptions to ensure that prohibited activities are never included.

MEMBER SUPERVISION

VFA typically employs a team-based model where each crew has four to six Members and one to two Crew Leaders who provide constant support and supervision throughout Members' service. Crew Leaders work along-side Members on projects and oversee and participate in trainings and camp routines as well. Additionally, Members are guided by Program Coordinators, Recruiters, Program Directors and agency partners who visit work sites regularly. Guidance is also provided during end-of-hitch debriefings with permanent staff members.

VFA selects, through a competitive process, those crew leader applicants with the most leadership and supervisory experience--giving some preference to veterans and/or program graduates. VFA conducts a proven multi-week residential crew leader training focused on technical skills, risk management, conflict resolution, administrative/reporting duties, delivering program curriculum, working with veterans and specific project knowledge.

MEMBER EXPERIENCE

The VFA Program provides all Members, regardless of slot type, the same level of National Wildfire Coordinating Group certification training that first year agency firefighters receive including: 1) First Aid/CPR; 2) S-212 Wildland Fire/Chainsaw [introduction to use and maintenance of chainsaws and their wildland fire application]; 3) S-130 Firefighting Training and S-190 Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior [a combined course offering entry-level firefighter skills, instruction in primary factors affecting the start and spread of wildfire, and L-180 Human Factors on the Fireline]; and 4) I-100 ICS Command System or NIMS-700a National Incident Management System [courses which provide a consistent template for government and private organizations to work together during domestic incidents]. In addition to these trainings, most VFA Members enrolled in terms of 675 hours or above receive certifications comparable to second-year fire fighter training which include all the previously listed trainings plus trainings such as: 1) Wilderness First Aid; 2) S-131 Firefighter Type 1
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Training [an eight-hour interactive course designed to facilitate learning through tactical decision-making training]; 3) S-133 Look up, Look Down, Look Around [a course designed to identify environmental factors and hazardous fire conditions and to incorporate them into risk management decisions]; and 4) S-211 Portable Pumps and Water Use & Introduction to Fire Signature Predictions [provides knowledge and skills to design, setup, operate, troubleshoot portable water delivery systems]. In addition, VFA Members receive USAJobs training or other training to help them in applying for federal positions along with resume building and career development support.

The nature of working in teams tends to build a sense of crew identity, and veterans readily identify with each other in their new roles just as they formed strong teams while in the military. Crew Leaders promote dialogs throughout the day as well as during structured time in the evening for discussion of best practices; how to address challenges, and reflection on the implications of service and the impacts of their work on the community and the environment. SCA is enlisting the help of a local college student to assess current program design as it relates to Member satisfaction and will use the results in an effort to maximize satisfaction and elevate retention. Conservation Legacy fosters opportunities to serve with other national service programs in the community, through disaster relief projects and on recognized National Days of Service. It encourages AmeriCorps networking through an alums group.

COMMITMENT TO AMERICORPS IDENTIFICATION

During orientation, time is allotted to discuss the history of AmeriCorps, and the mission and vision of the two organizations within a framework of AmeriCorps values. With veteran Corpsmembers there is a natural bridge from service to country to service of community and the environment. VFA provides work shirts, hard hats, water bottles and other personal gear emblazoned with the AmeriCorps and organizational logos. These items of the AmeriCorps "uniform" are required during working hours and encouraged beyond service hours. Many Members report that wearing service gear is a "conversation starter" allowing them opportunities to discuss their AmeriCorps service and the VFA program. AmeriCorps signage is prominent at offices and where feasible, at work sites.

Organizational Capability

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND AND STAFFING

Conservation Legacy, founded in 1998, and SCA, founded in 1957, together have 75 years' combined experience providing conservation service opportunities, education and training to young women and men as the nation's two largest national non-profit conservation service corps programs.
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Following similar compelling missions, both organizations are national in scope while placing emphasis on operating local programs. Conservation Legacy’s mission is to cultivate local action to produce enduring widespread impact in communities, ecosystems and people, and SCA’s mission is to build the next generation of conservation leaders and inspire lifelong stewardship of our environment and communities by engaging young people in hands on service to the land. Together, they impact the lives of thousands of young people and veterans annually, engaging them in meaningful work that benefits communities and the environment.

The projects completed by these young people working in concert with land management professionals have saved the nation hundreds of thousands of dollars in project costs and have accomplished projects that might otherwise not be completed. Involved in programs to provide veterans with life-changing training for the past six years, the two organizations, in partnership with the California Conservation Corps (CCC), applied for and received CNCS funding to support their combined veterans’ programs. Now in the third year of that grant, Conservation Legacy and SCA are again teaming up to re-compete for funding, CCC having decided to pursue other objectives. (All three organizations will complete year three of the present grant.)

Conservation Legacy and SCA share a common supervisory/chain of command structure. Conservation Legacy is headquartered in Durango, CO with regional offices in Durango, and Salida, CO; Tucson, Lakeside, and Flagstaff, AZ; Acoma Pueblo, and Gallup, NM; Chattanooga, TN; and Beckley, WV. SCA headquarters in Arlington, VA with regional offices in Charlestown, NH; Oakland, CA; Pittsburgh, PA; Chicago, IL; and Boise, ID. Conservation Legacy will assume fiscal oversight and overall responsibility for the VFA program; Amy Sovocool, Conservation Legacy VP, is the primary contact for this application.

Conservation Legacy is managed by a professional staff accountable to a CEO and under the management of a national Board of Directors, which has ultimate fiduciary responsibility for all aspects of the organization. Conservation Legacy directs six distinct programs, each of which operates as a division of the organization under the direction of an Executive Director who reports the Chief Operating Officer (COO). Senior staff, including the CEO, COO and VP, travel regularly to each office to ensure adherence to organizational and AmeriCorps principles. The Executive Directors and Regional Directors of each program are responsible for planning and implementing projects and working with public lands managers to identify high-needs projects. Program Directors and Program Coordinators work with Crew Leaders and directly with crews, ensuring that: 1) Members have adequate training and education; 2) projects are completed to the specifications of partners in a timely
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way; and, 3) Members have sufficient time and support to fulfill and adhere to AmeriCorps requirements.

VFA management will involve direct collaboration between SCA's VFA Program Manager and Regional Program Director and Conservation Legacy's Regional Directors in Tucson, AZ and in Durango, CO--both of whom have worked with the veterans programs since initiated in 2009. A high degree of communication and cooperation between the two organizations was established in the first three years of the grant cycle and will continue in order to maintain consistently high standards for Member recruitment and support; AmeriCorps compliance; reporting and evaluation; budget tracking and analysis; expenses and partner contributions.

Both organizations have administered AmeriCorps programs for at least 18 years; both participate in state-formula programs and/or collaborate as sub-grantees to other AmeriCorps-serving organizations such as The Corps Network. Conservation Legacy and SCA have each successfully managed National Direct programs through CNCS for approximately six years with. Conservation Legacy initiated a VISTA program in 2009 that is now one of the largest in the nation with 145 Members serving in 27 states and 2 territories. Conservation Legacy's Environmental Stewards program began in 2012 and this year placed 199 primarily AmeriCorps interns in 31 states. In the course of an 18-year partnership with CNCS, both organizations have developed highly experienced staff who understand the commitment that AmeriCorps programs command and are able to meet or exceed the standards set by CNCS.

Conservation Legacy and SCA work closely with federal, state and local land management agencies, community groups, non-profit organizations, Native American governments and private foundations in each community where they operate. Together they have ongoing formal agreements with USFS, NPS, BIA, BLM, USFWS, US Army and US Navy which will support the activities of the VFA Program. Partner agencies identify needs on public, tribal and private lands and work with Conservation Legacy and community stakeholders to design and plan implementation strategies--the process continually broadening by engaging new partners and increasing community outreach and volunteerism. Conservation Legacy is a co-founder and co-chair of the Partnership for the 21CSC; Conservation Legacy and SCA joined The Corps Network in founding the Public Lands Service Coalition.

COMPLIANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Conservation Legacy annually undergoes an independent A-133 audit and has never had a
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material weakness. CNCS site visits indicate solid financial management and "strong staff and system of oversight, review and accountability." Conservation Legacy also conducts routine self-audits to discover gaps in procedures followed or inconsistencies between regions. These periodic double-checks can uncover unintentional misunderstandings of procedures and address them in a timely manner. Conservation Legacy has had previous experience managing sub-grantees via another AmeriCorps grant and a Learn and Serve grant and will maintain close communication with SCA to discuss changes in AmeriCorps policy, reporting requirements or other issues related to sound AmeriCorps program management. SCA has built its programs on the same solid foundations as Conservation Legacy and will be equally responsive, as a sub-grantee in the VFA Program, to AmeriCorps rules and regulations including those related to prohibited and unallowable activities. Any instances of unacceptable actions or unallowable activities, if found, will be resolved immediately.

Conservation Legacy and SCA staff will participate in national AmeriCorps symposiums; and Conservation Legacy will observe monthly calls and regular check-ins with AmeriCorps staff to stay updated on the latest developments and changes. All commissions in states where Conservation Legacy anticipates placing AmeriCorps Members have been notified of this application. An initial consultation form was prepared and forwarded to the state commissions detailing the program focus and projected outcomes; specific operating sites and service sites; AmeriCorps slot configuration for the state; estimated budget for the state; proposed sources of match, etc. Follow-up phone calls were initiated within approximately one week by the Conservation Legacy Director of Member and Staff Support to discuss the program with individual state commission directors and to answer any questions or concerns. Conservation Legacy will maintain communication with the state commissions and participate in state commission activities as invited. State Commission staff are welcome to attend trainings and other events and will be notified of appropriate event dates.

Regularly scheduled meetings will ensure effective communication between Conservation Legacy and SCA. Bi-weekly reports from field crews will be constantly monitored so that all potential compliance issues or unallowable activities are flagged and addressed proactively. Both organizations utilize onboarding systems to ensure careful and accurate Member tracking throughout a term of service.

Before any project is selected, Conservation Legacy and SCA Program Directors, working directly with agency site managers, outline project scope, complete a Job Hazard Analysis, and review Member physical requirements and anticipated training needs. Additionally, medical reviews are done to ensure Member health and safety. All aspects of the Risk Management Project Plan--including
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emergency response protocols and emergency evacuation procedures--are completed before project start date. The schedules/availability of required trainers and training resources are confirmed. Worksites are chosen for their 1) demonstrated need for the proposed project work; 2) ability to meet AmeriCorps criteria; 3) quality of Member experience offered 4) possibilities for continued employment with agency partners 5) quality of training opportunities. Care is given to make sure that AmeriCorps Members do not duplicate, displace or supplant permanent staff or other volunteers.

Budget/Cost Effectiveness

COST EFFECTIVENESS

The basis for the VFA budget is the conservation corps budget model, which has been tested by the member organizations of The Corps Network, including both implementation partners for this proposed program. The budget provides resources for VFA team-based, service-learning projects through a model that has been proven effective by SCA and Conservation Legacy on AmeriCorps programs of similar size, scope and duration. The VFA AmeriCorps budget adequately supports the proposed program's design and all its activities by providing for strong central and local program direction, coordination, support and evaluation.

VFA Corpsmembers' support includes living allowances, supervision, transportation, tools, gear, equipment, insurance, back-end support and technical expertise. Transportation includes vans to transport crews, tools and equipment to and from field sites. Pre-enrollment costs include member physicals and background checks. Field supplies include camping equipment, camping supplies, occasional housing, field meals and other supplies for backcountry stints. Costs include staff salaries, benefits, staff travel, staff training/professional development, risk management, communications, technology, office supplies, facilities, evaluation and consulting support.

The budget supports Conservation Legacy and SCA staff responsible for managing the program. Staff are tasked with program preparation, supervision of training, curriculum modification and development, site project planning, agency liaison, AmeriCorps compliance, site visits and professional development including attendance at all CNCS trainings and conferences. Both organizations have a long track record of implementing successful field programs that meet all project outcomes as well as the development needs of all participants, including career prospect enhancing firefighting trainings and certifications. Conservation Legacy will assume fiscal responsibility and sub-grantee management for the program.

The total CNCS cost per MSY for the proposed VFA Program is $12,100, well within the range permitted by CNCS and lower than the cost per MSY of the preceding grant cycle. This cost is
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proportionate to a program designed for adult veterans and the maximal levels of support that this population requires in living allowance, training and education. In addition to a higher member living allowance, the budget provides for high quality member training curriculum including external certifications and trainings; instructional delivery; site/staff training and technical assistance; data collection and reporting for program outputs and outcomes; and third-party evaluation. The VFA Program’s primary emphasis is to provide a level of wildland firefighting certifications that will prepare Members as either first year or second year entry level firefighters.

The benefits of engaging AmeriCorps Members to accomplish environmental and community impact has been proven to be a cost-effective approach to real change with the added value of benefitting the Members themselves. USFS and other primary partners are aware of this value to the Members as well as the cost effectiveness of utilizing AmeriCorps teams to accomplish needed conservation work. Add to that the potential bonus to land managers in terms of building a reliable conduit for recruitment, and the result is loyal support of VFA programs and sufficient match to enable leveraging CNCS funding.

Conservation Legacy and SCA will raise $1,589,972 from non-CNCS sources, primarily through partnerships with public land management agencies. While most of these agencies do not finalize their 2017 budgets until much later in calendar year 2016, they have provided verbal commitments to Conservation Legacy and SCA to continue their partnerships. Both organizations will work with their respective partners to finalize funding commitments before the start of the AmeriCorps program year. What’s more, numerous current projects are in place that have multi-year commitments that extend to 2018.

BUDGET ADEQUACY

Conservation Legacy has full confidence in the proposed budget prepared in collaboration with the SCA Director after conducting detailed budgeting and funding projections. The VFA cost per MSY of $12,100 covers 17.45% of the support for each VFA member, leveraging CNCS funding by a match of 82.55%. Conservation Legacy regularly evaluates its costs against similar conservation corps programs to ensure that its costs are appropriate for its activities.

BUDGET CLARIFICATION ITEMS

1. The CCR Registration is scheduled to expire 06/25/16. Please remember the registration must be
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current and active to receive an award from CNCS.

Conservation Legacy has maintained a CCR registration for many years and will ensure that it renews its registration prior to the expiration date, as it has many times previously.

2. As of 03/31/2016, applicant has not submitted a copy of the current A-133 to the Audit Clearinghouse. No awards will be processed until a current A-133 has been submitted to the CNCS grants officer.

The A-133 audit was submitted to CNCS on April 19, 2016.

3. Source of Funds
Conservation Legacy and SCA will raise $1,589,972 from non-CNCS sources, primarily through partnerships with public land management agencies. The US Forest Service has committed their yearly support of approximately $1 million in funding to the Veterans Fire Corps program for FY 16. Other funding is still in the process of being finalized for FY 16 and Conservation Legacy and SCA are currently working with partners to secure FY 17 funding.

Evaluation Summary or Plan

Conservation Legacy and the Student Conservation Association (SCA) have joined with Mt. Adams Institute in commissioning an impact evaluation of MAI’s AmeriCorps programs and of Conservation Legacy and SCA’s Veteran Fire AmeriCorps (VFA) program that provide job training to military veterans in the natural resources and public lands management fields. The evaluation will assess the impact of participating in MAI and VFA veterans programs on short-term outcomes associated with job readiness and career success as well as the relationships among program processes and outcomes.

THEORY OF CHANGE:

The VFA Program’s primary focus is to assist veterans through the difficult process of reintegration to civilian life by addressing a critical component of the readjustment process: relevant job acquisition through training, certification and professional connections in the land management field--while contributing to fire resistant forests through fire mitigation treatments and helping land managers in the development of a strong work force.

Veteran program models with activities consistent with those of the VFA Program have found
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favorable results in attaining similar outcomes (Bellotti, Laffaye, Weingardt, Fischer, Schumacher: "Re-visioning veteran readjustment," July 2009) and (Gould, Scheinberg, and Matthieu: "The Mission Continues: A Case Study of the Well After Service Model," November, 2014). These studies indicate promising evidence of the causal role that job training in an outdoor setting, training opportunities and community service can have on veterans’ reintegration to civilian lives and careers.

Relevant to this evaluation plan, there is one primary area of impact associated with the VFA program to be evaluated: Veterans’ ability to obtain meaningful jobs leading to careers through the development of employability skills, formal certifications recognized in the land management field, and access to professional networks.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS:

1. Do corps programs focused on veterans from the U.S. armed forces improve outcomes associated with civilian job readiness and career success?
2. What is the relationship between relevant program design, characteristics, and processes with outcomes associated with civilian job readiness and career success?

STUDY COMPONENTS:

The evaluation team will work with corps personnel to identify key outcomes and measures associated with civilian job readiness and career success. This process is necessary to ensure outcome measures are both scientifically valid as well as relevant measures for the corps programs being evaluated. Program processes and characteristics will be used to understand relationships between program elements and outcomes. These measures include: importance and performance of key program components, length of participation, program type (e.g., internship/crew), perceived program quality and other collaboratively identified measures. Relevant demographic data will be collected from participants (e.g., age, gender, current educational status, current educational attainment, time on active duty).

Data will be collected from participants in all veterans’ corps programs who choose to take part in the evaluation. Additional data would be collected from a comparable group of non-participants who would serve as a comparison group. The inclusion of a comparison group in the evaluation will allow for a stronger connection to be made between observed outcomes and participation in the program. The comparison group will be collected using qualifying delimiters to ensure it is representative of the general population of veterans with similar demographic characteristics as corps participants. These
delimiting characteristics will be identified in consultation with corps staff.

The evaluation will employ a retrospective end of program survey. The retrospective survey will ask participants to respond to questions about their status both currently (i.e., at the end of the program) and before participating in the program. Compared to traditional pre-post designs, this approach allows participants to more accurately report changes in conditions because they have a better understanding of their baseline condition. For members of the comparison group, a standard time will be chosen to represent a similar elapsed time to length of corps programs.

An additional follow-up, online survey, will also occur three months after the completion of the initial evaluation for participants only.

EVALUATION TEAM QUALIFICATIONS:

Our evaluation team is led by Co-Investigators Dr. Michael Edwards of NC State University and Dr. Mat Duerden of Brigham Young University. Drs. Edwards and Duerden have the extensive evaluation and project management experience necessary to ensure successful implementation of the evaluation plan. Dr. Edwards led the evaluation of the Texas Healthy Adolescence Initiative, a multi-site community-level intervention funded through the Title V Maternal and Child Health program, for Texas Department of State Health Services. Dr. Edwards currently serves on the evaluation team for a Community Transformation Project, funded by CDC and NC Department of Public Health, focused on joint use agreements. He is also leading a project co-funded by the CDC and National Park Service aimed at identifying metrics for the contribution of parks and trails to public health goals. Dr. Edwards has presented on evaluation methodologies at the American Evaluation Association national conference and published articles related to his evaluation work in the Journal of Adolescent Health, American Journal of Health Promotion, and Journal of School Health. Dr. Duerden has conducted evaluations for over 10 years with a specific focus on agencies focused on youth, including non-profits and governmental organizations. He has published articles related to his evaluation work in a variety of journals, including the Journal of Environmental Psychology, Journal of Extension, Journal of Youth Development, Leisure Sciences, and Journal of Park and Recreation Administration.

Drs. Edwards and Duerden have co-led multiple conservation program evaluations for the Public Lands Service Coalition, Conservation Legacy, and the Corps Network since 2010.

ESTIMATED BUDGET:

The evaluation budget covers a three-year period; costs represented here are for the 2016-2017
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year. Faculty salaries are $2,000 and include time spent in evaluation design, supervising instrument
development, creating and delivering training protocols, consulting with corps during data collection,
data analysis, and reporting. $4,050 is included for a part-time student assistantship; $2,000 for
travel; $500 for comparison survey expenses; $250 for miscellaneous supplies; $2,952 for graduate
student tuition and fees and indirect costs of $2,223. A sub-contract with Brigham Young University
is calculated at $3,900.

Total Estimated Evaluation Cost: $17,875

Amendment Justification

N/A

Clarification Summary

A. General clarification items:

1. If the application is being considered for an amount different than the original request (funding,
MSY, and/or slots), please revise the Executive Summary, budget, and performance measures as
necessary to reflect the amount for which the application is under consideration.

The application is not being considered for an amount different than the original request.

2. While CNCS will prioritize early start dates in award processing, the earliest possible start date
CNCS can consider is July 1st, 2016. Please adjust your requested start and end dates as necessary.

The anticipated start date for this program will be August 1, 2016.

3. It typically takes new AmeriCorps programs at least one to two months of preparation to be ready
to enroll members. It is advisable that new programs select a member enrollment period starting
August 1st, 2016, at the earliest. Please adjust your requested enrollment period dates as necessary.

The start date for this program will be August 1, 2016. The non-profit organizations that will be
managing the program and members have both run similar programming for the last three years and
can easily manage the requirements of an AmeriCorps program with this anticipated start date.
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4. Funding is extremely competitive and limited this year. Having a low Cost Per Member Service year (MSY) is a competitive advantage. Applicants submitting with a low cost per MSY will receive higher priority for funding. Please consider decreasing the application's proposed cost per MSY by revising the CNCS share of the program budget, or provide a compelling explanation for why the cost/MSY cannot be decreased. CNCS will review both the individual program cost per MSY and the aggregate cost per MSY after the clarification period and may elect to make further decreases in cost per MSY and/or may be only able to partially fund applicants.

The applicant does not plan on changing the cost per MSY request for this grant. The cost per MSY was initially reduced in the re-compete application process from the previous AmeriCorps grant operated by a different prime grantee using the same Veterans Fire Corps model.

B. Programmatic clarification items:

1. It is unclear whether member activities will provide significant and unique efforts for forest fire mitigation or restoration. Please fully describe the value-add of utilizing AmeriCorps members and how members will produce significant and unique contributions.

Engaging recent-era Veterans on projects focused on forest fire mitigation and restoration has dual purpose. The program is designed to accomplish important project work while also helping veterans re-train and prepare for a civilian job. The US Forest Service and other land management agency partners see this program model as a unique way to prepare veterans for employment as wildland firefighters and help them transition from military to civilian service.

Many veterans want to be able to continue to serve their country after they leave the military; they want to find a purpose they can connect with but struggle to do so. Veterans are well trained and prepared to work in a crew setting under challenging circumstances to complete important projects such as forest fire mitigation or restoration. Land management agencies are able to complete additional fire fuels mitigation work that wouldn't otherwise be completed by engaging the Veteran Fire AmeriCorps programs. Every additional acre treated provides more protection for vulnerable communities.
Additionally, the members are able to serve alongside potential agency employers while completing projects and gaining skills. This gives both the member and the partner opportunities to engage with each other. The members gain important potential job connections and critical technical skills. The partners learn about the skills and abilities of the members and can then hire Veterans they know and trust for an upcoming fire season. Agency partners have termed the program as the "minor league" for wildland fire. It provides a unique opportunity for veterans to explore a career while in transition and gain skills and experience needed for career success. The model provides a unique way to set recent era veterans up for success in future jobs.

2. Please explain whether member positions (slots) being requested as part of this application are also duplicated in any other application currently under review by CNCS. If applicable, indicate how many slots are duplicated and the application(s) in which duplicated slots are requested. Additionally, please indicate the applicant's preference for handling duplicated slots among applications if funded.

These slots are not duplicated in any other application currently under review by CNCS.

3. The Executive Summary contains additional information on program status and legal applicant information. Please revise the Executive Summary to conform to the requirements specified in the 2016 AmeriCorps State and National Grants Notice of Federal Funding Opportunity.

The required changes were made and entered into the Executive Summary.

4. The applicant proposes an ambitious member training plan. Please describe how the applicant will ensure that member training is 20% or less of the total aggregate agreed upon member service hours in the program, as required in 45 CFR §252.5.

Training is absolutely a critical part of the program and the overall program design is constructed so that no more than 20% of the members' time is spent on training. The terms of service are 450 hour terms and 900 hour terms. A 450 hour term is a 12 week program and includes two weeks (16.6% of total time) spent in training. A 900 hour term is a 26 week program and also includes the same two weeks (7.7% of total time) spent in training.
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5. The applicant discusses sub-grantee management experience and communication; however in instances of program violations, how accountability between applicant and sub-applicant occur, as well as how violations are to be addressed are unclear. Please share how the applicant will hold itself, subgrantees, and service site locations (if applicable) accountable if instances of risk or noncompliance are identified.

The applicant (Conservation Legacy) will insure that the sub-applicant signs a clear Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that details program expectations, and financial and programmatic reporting requirements. The MOU will also clearly outline other risk management requirements and will provide details of what happens in the instances of violations, risk or non-compliance. Conservation Legacy will rely on the MOU if issues arise related to accountability and/or compliance. Conservation Legacy previously operated two CNCS programs (AmeriCorps National Direct and Learn and Serve America Summer of Service) where it had sub-grantees and effectively used MOUs to outline and address accountability.

6. The applicant proposes to have a fixed amount grant. Fixed amount grants require that only full-time or less than full-time positions serving in a full-time capacity are permitted. Please confirm that the half-time, reduced half-time, and quarter-time members will serve in a full-time capacity in this program.

All members, regardless of term of service, will serve in a full-time capacity.

7. Per the Notice, past performance was assessed for recompeting applicants. The past performance assessment identified the following areas for follow-up: not meeting performance measure outcome targets, less than 100% Enrollment, less than 100% Retention, and less than 100% compliance with 30-day enrollments and exits. Please provide an explanation of these performance factors and describe the plan to address these issues.

The Veterans Fire Corps program engages a demographic that is challenging to recruit for, has family and financial obligations can be barriers to success and, if they are successful in the program often get hired by agency partners before the program is complete. Reaching 100% enrollment is the goal,
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however, there are often no-show members on the first day even after significant communication from program staff. This current proposal reduced the totally number of members engaged to reach a more realistic enrollment target and, because the program has been in operation for three years, there is more experience and networks available to help insure that recruitment is easier and more successful.

The 100% goal is not realistic for the Veterans Fire AmeriCorps for a variety of reasons. The program has a focus on post-program employment that results in members leaving early for jobs in wildland fire; this is not discouraged because it is the intended outcome for a successful member. Additionally, family needs for these members are more complex than that of a typical AmeriCorps member which can lead retention issues. Members are well versed in program expectations prior to selection but unexpected challenges at home can result in an early exit. Finally, the veteran demographic that is engaged in this programming is searching for what is next after military service. During the VFA program, a member may determine that wildland fire is not of interest to them after learning more about what it entails. If they decide wildland fire is not in their future they often leave the program; less likely than other members to finish out a commitment to something that they don’t clearly see as providing them a direct benefit for post-program employment. To insure that the retention rate is as high as possible, the program will align program dates to prepare members for specific fire hire deadlines so members are not picked up in the middle of the program. Additionally, staff will continue to develop resources that provide a clear background and expectations for applicants and members to insure that individuals engaged can commit to the duration of the program and not leave for financial reasons or because they aren't interested in the end goal of wildland fire employment.

Conservation Legacy understands the importance of the 100% compliance with the 30 day deadlines and has had significant success in previous grants managing compliance in this area. Conservation Legacy staff continually monitor to insure these deadlines are met and will be hiring an additional Admissions Assistant to help with this requirement. The sub-grantee, the Student Conservation Association, will be responsible for their own enrollments and exits but Conservation Legacy will provide oversight on the enrollment and exit dates and work closely to insure that they meet required deadlines. If there are mistakes made on enrollments or exits, the reason why it was missed will be clearly identified and steps will be put in place to pre-empt the error in the future.
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C. Budget clarification items:

Entered into the Budget/Cost Effectiveness category.

D. Performance Measure clarification items:

Entered changes into the Performance Measures screens per clarification instructions including revised MSY allocations and the removal of the Professional Development and Training for Wildland Firefighting performance measure. Narrative was added to the Described Instruments sections of appropriate measures.

D. Evaluation clarification items:

None needed.

F. MSY with No Program Funds Attached clarification items.

Conservation Legacy is not requesting any additional No Program Funds Attached slots.

Continuation Changes

N/A

Grant Characteristics