
Applicant Feedback Summary: External Evidence Review 2017 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Appalachian Forest Heritage Area

Application ID: 17AC189399

Program Name: AFHA - Enhancing Assets to Benefit Communities

The purpose of this summary feedback is to enhance our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). These comments originate from the External Review and are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment. Rather, the analysis pertains to the evidence base portion of the application and the elements that had the greatest impact on Reviewer determinations for the Evidence Tier and Quality Rating. This feedback consists of summary comments from more than one Reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem inconsistent or reflect multiple views. External Review comments do not represent all of the information used in the final funding decision.

External Review Summary Comments

EVALUATION REQUIREMENTS

Evaluation Required: No

Evaluation Submitted: N/A

Type of Grantee: Small

SMALL/EAP GRANTEE EVALUATION REQUIREMENTS

Internal or External Evaluator: N/A

Process, Outcome, or Impact Evaluation: N/A

At Least One Year of AmeriCorps Program Activity: N/A

Comments:

EVIDENCE REVIEW

Evidence Tier Claimed: Preliminary

Number of Studies Submitted: 2

Number of Studies Assessed: 0

Evidence Tier Assessed: Preliminary

Quality Rating: Medium

Evidence Tier Justification:

This applicant's level of evidence is Preliminary based on a recent purported quasi-experimental design study of volunteer management outcomes. The AFHA program is utilizing a variety of interventions (education, restoration, volunteer management) performed by AmeriCorps members and additional volunteers to promote environmental stewardship, capacity building, and community development in rural West Virginia. The volunteer management study used 2014-16 data collected from AFHA sub-sponsor organizations with similar organizations acting as controls and employed reliable pre/post measures of volunteer capacity (from a study of the similar CalSERVES program) and organizational effectiveness (from an Urban Institute study of volunteer management and retention). Sample sizes are not reported, although a power analysis indicated that the sample was sufficiently large to detect program effects with an error rate of 10% ($p < 0.10$). Analyses by an independent evaluator found significantly higher levels of volunteer management capacity at the AFHA sites but did not find any effect of AFHA on organizational effectiveness compared to control sites. It is unclear whether the study would qualify as a quasi-experimental design (QED) since there is no information given on how the control sites were selected for comparison. The application also included a description of performance

measures focused on the goals of environmental stewardship and community development that suggests positive program impacts on both outputs and short-term outcomes. Note that for applicants assessed at a Preliminary Evidence Tier, attached studies or reports are not considered as part of the review.

Quality Rating Justification:

The Quality Rating of the evidence provided is Medium. The 2014-16 external evaluation of AFHA programs on volunteer management used reliable data collection instruments and appropriate statistical procedures for inferring an impact of AFHA programming on organizational capacity. However, the potential for response bias in the data collection is unclear. Several additional study descriptions included in the application highlight different study design issues. In the case of a description of an experimental study on red spruce restoration, the role of AFHA members is unclear. Furthermore, reports of AFHA program improvements that utilize performance measures often lack a clear pre/post design (e.g., exhibit development) or one that relates to intended outputs or outcomes (e.g., educational outreach) as described in the program logic model. In each case, more information is needed to fully assess data quality.