AmeriCorps Member and Site Monitoring and Reporting Requirements

Here are some guiding questions to frame our discussion today – or perhaps we could call them "burning questions"

We will talk about the answers to all three of these on the upcoming slides

First, though, let's locate ourselves in the cycle of AmeriCorps Program Development—this should be a familiar graphic from previous webinars in this New AmeriCorps Program Staff Series

Monitoring occurs in the Implementation and Program Evaluation/Revisions phases (in red here) and supports the continued growth of the program's vision and foundation. It is a critical part of continuous program improvement, since it provides a "reality check" about what is actually happening on the ground and allows you to make informed decisions.

It's essential that monitoring not be an "add on" to someone's already full job description. Needs to be integrated into all aspects of program management, and all program staff will have some role in it.

Here is the language from the Code of Federal Regulations, or CFR for short that answers the first burning question: what you are required to monitor. The answer, essentially, is everything. Monitoring needs to cover each program, function, or activity supported by the grant or subgrant. This of course includes AmeriCorps members' service activities, but it also includes other core program functions like training and supervision, data collection, budget expenditures, etc.

The CFR also states the end goals of monitoring: ensure compliance with applicable Federal requirements, and ensure that performance goals are being achieved. On the compliance side, a helpful trio of principles to keep in mind is prevent, detect, and enforce:

Prevent compliance issues from happening by setting up strong systems for training and oversight;

Detect any compliance issues as soon as they occur through robust monitoring strategies; and

Enforce corrective actions to ensure that the compliance issues are resolved promptly and preventative measures put in place for the future

Regarding performance goals, it's important to develop high-quality data collection tools and systems that will help you monitor your progress in achieving the outputs and outcomes you committed to in your grant application. You also want to keep track of your performance related to member management: member enrollment and retention, impact of member training and development, etc. Finally, you want to be monitoring your budget to make sure

you are able to "live within your means" and that you have the necessary funds to make service happen.

Here's another, and probably better, way of looking at monitoring – not just a legal requirement but also an opportunity to gauge and channel the impact of all the different member and site activities that happen each year, including the taxpayer funds that you use to support these activities.

Ultimately, you want all of these elements to "pull together" in service of the ultimate goal of "getting things done." This means that you are:

--Managing public resources effectively

--Achieving positive and meaningful impacts for program beneficiaries, for the broader community, and for the AmeriCorps members themselves.

In order to achieve that fundamental goal, you need a well-thought-out monitoring plan that you put in place from the very earliest stages of program implementation. Your plan should address the "who/what/when/where/how" questions:

Who? Program and finance staff working together as a unified team. I can't emphasize enough how important it is that both the programmatic and the financial sides of the organization do monitoring together, and that they communicate openly with each other about what they are seeing and what it means.

What? All aspects of AmeriCorps-funded activity – described on the previous slide

When? Monitoring activities should be built into the program and finance staff's schedules right up front and should follow the flow of the program year. Different types of monitoring may be more appropriate for different points in the year; we will talk more about that in a couple of slides. It's important to be really transparent about the monitoring plan and make sure that everyone involved knows what to expect: staff, sites, members.

Where and How? On-site and/or virtually. We will talk on the next slide about some possible monitoring methods you can use. The specific methods you select will depend on the program's geography and design, and will also depend on the particular type(s) of risk posed by the program.

Here is what I will call our "pyramid of monitoring." (Those of you who dabble in architecture probably know that a triangle is one of the strongest and most stable shapes for building a structure, so the design we chose here is not an accident!)

Note that risk-based assessment is at the center of the pyramid – and is central to all monitoring plans, no matter the type of program.

The results of the risk-based assessment will inform your choice of monitoring methods. Common strategies used by programs include on-site visits, desk reviews, written reports, and on-going communication with members and sites.

Let's talk a little more about risk-based assessment. Initially it may sound negative to suggest that you look at your program sites and members through the lens of risk, but the goal is ultimately a positive one: to diagnose potential challenges BEFORE they happen and put the right kinds of supportive structures in place to make sure that every site and every member is able to be successful.

There are a lot of advantages to risk-based assessment:

It gives you a chance to look comprehensively at all aspects of your program in a consistent way, so that everyone gets the level of support that is right for them

Unless you have unlimited staff time and capacity, which I'm GUESSING you probably don't, it allows you to be smart about how you allocate your team members' time. If you have a large nationwide program, it simply may not be possible to visit every site in person every year. So it makes sense to devote more staff time for in-depth monitoring of the most risky activities or sites, while using less time-intensive monitoring strategies for the less risky areas of the program.

You also want to make sure you're choosing monitoring strategies that are appropriate for the conditions on the ground. A risk assessment allows you to figure out the areas where the chance of potential challenges is highest, and then choose the monitoring approaches that mitigate those challenges the best. For example, if your risk assessment indicates the possibility of staff displacement at a particular site, your monitoring strategies should include reviews of member position descriptions and regular interviews/conversations with members placed at that site.

Regarding logistics: risk assessments are generally structured as a series of questions about each subgrantee or site. Some questions will probably cover areas that are "riskier" than others in terms of potential impact on program success, so it makes sense to weight your questions based on the degree of risk they represent. And it also makes sense to do the risk assessments on or before the start of the program year, so that you can design your monitoring plan using a full set of up-to-date information.

However, risk assessment isn't a once-a-year-and-done exercise; as conditions at different sites change or as the program model evolves, you need to continually assess how those changes impact the challenges faced by the program and what monitoring approaches you should use to mitigate those challenges.

Here are some risk "flags" to look for, both during the risk assessment process and throughout the program year.

Member service issues are a common risk flag, particularly if you detect activities that are prohibited or unallowable under AmeriCorps regulations.

The actions of members and site staff may also be risk flags: a lot of staff turnover, poor member retention, late or incomplete reports, and/or or unexplained absences from trainings or program-wide events.

You may see risk flags in programmatic data – for example, outputs and outcomes that are a lot lower or a lot higher than you would have expected given the program model.

Finally, you may see financial flags: spending rates that are higher or lower than they should be, problems with meeting match commitments, or expenditures that don't seem to fit the type of program activities that are taking place.

All of these things should activate your "Spidey sense" and alert you that there is a risk for performance or compliance concerns that need to be addressed through monitoring.

When selecting monitoring methods, you should consider the following:

1. The degree and types of risk posed by subgrantee/site

The results of your risk assessment can help you prioritize sites and subgrantees to monitor and determine which methods to utilize in different cases.

For example, sites that have high level of risk may require site visits where you can review their systems and processes in person, meet with members and staff, and observe their program operations.

On the other hand, if you have sites or subgrantees that continuously perform well and are assessed as low risk, they may not need as frequent or in-depth monitoring and regular check-in calls and desk monitoring may be sufficient.

2. Areas of focus for monitoring

When selecting a monitoring method, you should also consider the area of program management and compliance that you are trying to focus on.

For example, if you are monitoring an organization's overall policies and procedures, you can do a desk audit of their written materials and provide feedback on their practices. Then, you can follow up with other monitoring methods on issues of concern that arise from the desk audit.

If you are monitoring their member management, specifically, it may be necessary to be onsite, so you can review member files in person, observe members during their service, meet with their supervisors, and overall get a feel for their place of service and their experience.

3. Budget and staff capacity

Monitoring is essential to every AmeriCorps program, but it costs money and time to do it well. This is where the risk-based approach can be helpful – it can help you prioritize the areas that are of higher risk and utilize your limited staff time and financial resources on the areas of the most concern.

4. Timing of monitoring activities

Monitoring should be a year-around activity and should incorporate various methods.

Since site visits and desk audits are usually time and labor intensive, you should schedule those during the less busy time periods in your program.

Tt is a good idea to visit new sites and subgrantees as early as possible to provide them with any additional technical assistance and to make sure they start off on the right foot.

To help get the most of the site visits, you should:

Ask open-ended questions during member and staff interviews

Observe member service in action

Gather and cross-check information from personnel in multiple roles (such as members, site supervisors, program directors and others).

You should come up with planned interview questions for individuals in different roles and try to get a comprehensive and consistent view of the program operations.

Review key documents prior to visit: site agreement, member position descriptions, application budget

These will provide you with a lot of good preliminary information that can help you learn about how the organization operates and inform the rest of your visit and which areas need additional level of inquiry.

Consider unannounced visits

These are not ideal and can cause some challenges. But they may be necessary in certain circumstances, particularly if you do not have confidence that you are getting sufficient information about what is truly happening on the ground through pre-planned site visits.

For example, if you receive complaints from members at a particular site about their service conditions or safety and the site does a good job of disguising those so they are not visible during a planned visit, it may be good for you to come unannounced one time to see if the situation may be different during a typical service day.

A service position description is a key tool in member management and monitoring.

As you know, all programs are required to have position descriptions included in the member agreements that accurately and thoroughly describe their roles and responsibilities within the program and their specific service activities.

Here is a sample member position description. Please note specifically areas in red that are to be monitored throughout the year:

First, the member duties – this is critical as this is an area of frequent concern in member management. The approved member duties must be clear to the member, their supervisor, and leadership at their host site. This can help you avoid members being assigned tasks that are outside of the scope of their service or that are potentially prohibited.

Second, time requirements – Knowing the expectations related to the time commitment for a specific member can help you when monitoring the timekeeping processes and whether members are serving sufficient hours to allow them to complete their term on time. Similarly, excessive hours served at various times in the year may be a red flag related to overall member management and may signal that members may have been asked to do additional duties that may not have originally planned for or approved by the program.

Third, evaluation and reporting – make sure that there is sufficient feedback between the member and the program about their service and their experience by providing them with an opportunity to report periodically on their activities and to assess their performance during and at the end of their service year.

Similarly, a site agreement can help in your monitoring efforts.

Please make sure that you spell out the expectations related to the resources and support that should be provided to the members by their host sites and their requirements for adhering with AmeriCorps Policies and Procedures.

The agreement on this slide provides examples of such support.

Please keep in mind that, while there are CNCS expectations related to member training and supervision for all programs, what that looks like on the ground will depend on the specific program design and may vary from program to program.

It is important to keep in mind that a well-crafted site agreement that outlines your specific expectations for member support will be very important in your efforts to ensure successful member service and to monitor your sites.

Some of the best practices for desk audits include:

Ensuring in-depth reviews of member documentation: not just presence but also content.

For example, if you are checking member agreement, don't just check to make sure it's in the member file, but review to make sure it includes all the requires information.

2. Reviewing criminal history check documentation for members AND staff.

3. Ensuring appropriate tracking and verification of staff and member time.

Can do this by sampling a specific time period.

Should also consider reviewing timesheets for members who were exited to make sure the hours that were reported in the AmeriCorps portal are supported with timesheets.

4. Reviewing financial transactions and match documentation (in collaboration with finance staff).

5. In selecting files to review, you should aim for representative samples.

For example, when pulling a sample of member files, try to include members of different service terms, those who have been exited and those who are still serving; include members who were exited early to ensure proper early exit documentation.

6. Utilizing secure file transfer systems to receive files with sensitive personal information from your subgrantees and sites.

As I mentioned previously, monitoring is a year-around ongoing activities. In addition to site visits and desk audits that may happen at specific times during the year, there are other methods that can happen throughout.

They include:

Regularly scheduled check-ins (by phone, in-person)

Email correspondence

-Pay attention to questions being asked during phone and email correspondence and for any indication that additional technical assistance or inquiry may be needed for specific issues that may come up.

Progress and financial reports

Reimbursement requests

Member training and reflection activities

+Social Media

- Keep in mind that building trusting relationships is key to an effective monitoring process.

You must ensure that you have proper systems in place to document your monitoring activities, including site visits, desk audits, and other interactions.

You can discuss setting up those systems with your program officer. Some programs use the CNCS monitoring tool as a starting point and adopt it to their organization. You can get a copy of the tool from your program officer.

So, what if I find a problem? Here are the steps you should take:

Document the issue

Specify required corrective actions in writing

Notify CNCS if appropriate

Re-train staff and/or members

Follow-up within a reasonable period to confirm correction

Disallow hours and/or costs if needed

The extent of the specific response may depend on the problem – always discuss with the Program Officer or Grant Officer (for financial findings) if you are not sure. If you identify significant issues, such as prohibited activities or instances of fraud, waste, or abuse, you must follow the reporting requirements that are outlined in the Grant Terms & Conditions.

Now that we have discussed member and site monitoring more broadly, we would like to give the floor to our colleagues from the field who will be able to share their experience on the ground with this area of AmeriCorps program management.

We are very fortunate to have the expertise of Felicia Williams, from Habitat for Humanity and Maureen Eccleston from PennSERVE, the service commission in Pennsylvania.

First, we will give the floor to Felicia, who will address site and member monitoring from a national direct perspective. Felicia?

Let's take a closer look at the foundation – who are your stake holders?

Think about internal and external

These stakeholders become literal stakes in the foundation for you.

There are stakeholders at your organization. secondary stakeholders, also…the staff at the site, the board at the site, the volunteers, donors – the intermediary needs to be aware of this at minimum; don't assume that internal customers understand and held accountable.

Example: one person is the contact HSM, but there are member supervisors – we realized there was opportunity to strengthen the program by providing more support to site for the direct supervisors and the sites

The guiding document that helps to define that relationship is what we call the participation agreement.

This is just a guiding document. For you it may be a meeting with that provides the specific roles and responsibilities of who is involved, it may be a planning document, or a MOU

The more important thing is that whatever it is it becomes the foundational guidance as an agreement between you and sites that outlines the commitments and expectations of your partnership in the management of a program.

The stronger your relationship is with your sites and the expectations and results are reinforced with your sites, the more it will happen organically with your members. Members will shadow what sites share with them…

One it is established, you need to be able to enforce it.

So, we know have our foundation set. Let's talk about building the house upon that foundation..

What are the components?

Training/technical assistance

What do we need sub grantees/ remote sites to know (requirements) & skills, resources

What do your sites want to know & skills, resource

How will you implement the plan – what can they own, what do you own?

Agree upon a plan that is mindful of your own limitations & then prioritize

This component includes the Host Site Training Plan, additional trainings, technical assistance and resources that will be provided throughout the service year. For the purposes of determining initial training needs, Host Sites and Host Site Managers will be categorized as new or returning. Each June, we have a conference for Host Site Managers on various topics that will assist them during the service year.

This may be quarterly check in calls to review certain aspects of the program, larger training event, directing current resources that exist (OnCorps, National Service Knowledge Network, others working in the organization, community partners)

Determine what the needs are and what you will provide v/s provided by site. Who manages the members?

Our experience shows us that the risk in this area is that this area is not always well communicated with sites and consistently applied.

What is important is to be clear about what expectations….what must you be consulted on? Decide on?

Have you reviewed the member agreements, or terms/conditions/benefits with your sites? Do your sites review this with their members?

How do you reinforce it at all levels?

The Host Site has primary responsibility for the management of members. HFH NS provides direct support to the Host Sites and secondary support to members. Member management includes, but is not limited to, the Member Development Plan, member reporting, timesheets, benefits, incidents and disciplinary procedures.

What are your required metrics? What tool are you using to collect consistently and accurately?

Do your sites know what they need to collect, when and what information they need to archive?

Is it user friendly? Is it the same tool for all sites?

Are the reports reviewed consistently?

Are the reports reviewed as a monitoring tool?

Evaluating the results and sharing with your stakeholders, including your sites and members?

"Good story" example – how HFHI has shared good story wall at NSLC, HSM meeting, monthly updates, facebook, etc.

How do you review, monitor, ensure that information is accurate?

Host Sites submit regular reports to HFHI NS to: communicate progress towards project goals and the Member Development Plan; provide output /outcome data, share great stories, highlight successes & challenges and identify additional training and support needs. These reports will be reviewed as part of the Host Site monitoring process.

When does monitoring happen and where/how?

It is not a one time event – it happens naturally during conversations, review of timesheets, reports, site visits, events, trainings,

Review what is monitored in advance – it is a partnership to identify areas of support needs.

Put the work on the site – self evaluation

If you are doing a monitoring, we recommend self evaluation first so that you can utilize time to the maximum – identify T/TA needs in advance and it helps to resolve any type of compliance issues sooner v/s later.

Not a time of judging or investigation – ties back to on going partnership

You know you are doing it right if there are no surprises or if the surprises are minor.

Utilize technology – video conferencing (skype), make the experience more personal, more investment

Use every opportunity to assess the site – is someone else visiting? Are there other opportunities to monitor beyond your relationship?

The purpose of the Host Site Monitoring Plan is to assess the progress towards meeting project goals, assess the Host Site's compliance with applicable program and fiscal requirements and identify and address support needs. This monitoring plan includes communication between Host Site and program staff, desk reviews, site visits, reviews of reports and Host Site coordination with HFH staff on member relations issues.

 Why do we monitor? Strengthen our programs – help them see ways to improve, help them decrease their risk level, help them see the areas where they are already strong and have some pride in that. AND we monitor to ensure we are using public dollars effectively and within the law.

Key challenge is PennSERVE staff capacity, especially in the last year. Solution: Lots of desk monitoring. In 2016, I visited about half of our portfolio, but those were not monitoring visits as much as they were about relationship building and learning. In 2017, with hopeful added capacity, doing in-person monitoring as well. The benefits of in-person are in some of the less tangibles, plus in talking with host site staff and AmeriCorps members. Either way, monitoring is a process! I'm going to share some of our techniques and tools so you can see what we are looking for and how we manage the process.

I will share some of our processes for monitoring throughout the year.

We also provide in-person training and regular communication with our programs. Developing relationships helps with monitoring! People are going to be more willing to work with you, to seek advice, to admit mistakes, and to take your feedback and requirements if monitoring isn't the only time you're in touch with them. So we have a two-day in-person training in the beginning of the year, monthly conference calls, and bi-weekly email updates. And remember I said I visited about half of our programs last year, which gave them an opportunity to show off their program, let me meet members and supervisors, etc. So when I go next time for a monitoring visit, there's a positive experience to draw on.

For today, I'm going to focus on some of the most formal aspects of our monitoring – assessments, document reviews, and desk monitoring.

We also just started using a brand new tool this year to evaluate particular policies and systems and determine both the risk level and what, specifically, we'll work on with the grantee during the year. Then we'll do that assessment at the end as well.

Resources at www.nationalservice.gov

    - Grant Provisions

- National Service Knowledge Network: e-Courses on site and member management (www.nationalservice.gov/resources/online-courses)