

Orientation for New Commission Staff

Webinar Session Highlights (May 24, 2018)



Given the leadership role that State Service Commissions play in the delivery of AmeriCorps State and National resources and in the leadership of AmeriCorps across the country, CNCS developed this webinar to focus on critical CNCS- and AmeriCorps-related topics for new hires and for commission staff who organize new employee orientations. The session provided an overview of key knowledge and skills needed by commission staff to be effective AmeriCorps grant managers and CNCS partners; highlighted important information that new commission staff need in their first week and month on the job; and shared best practices and lessons learned from staff at two state commissions.

Speakers:

Beth Binkley, Program Officer, AmeriCorps State and National

Katie Koski, Program Officer, Massachusetts Service Alliance

Amber Martin-Jahn, Executive Director, Serve Washington

Beth McGuinness, Director of Programs, Massachusetts Service Alliance

Barbara Reynolds, Senior Program and Project Specialist, AmeriCorps State and National

Knowledge and Skills Required

CNCS identified several broad categories of **knowledge** that commission staff – regardless of role or level – are expected to build over time:

- *CNCS Overview:* Staff should know basic information about CNCS including the agency’s mission, structure, budget and budget process, fit within the federal government, and communication practices, as well as the national service laws that govern AmeriCorps’ grantmaking and core business.
- *AmeriCorps Overview:* Similar to the CNCS overview, staff should know the mission and history of AmeriCorps, how program cycles work, and how programs and members can best be supported. Staff should also be familiar with best practices for program development and member support, available resources, and methods to support diverse programs and connect programs within one’s state and the broader national network.
- *Commission Overview:* Staff should know the ins and outs of their own commission including its history and evolution, what grants have been approved by the state commission, who commissioners and members of commission boards are, and what the organizational context is within the state.
- *Subgrantees:* Staff should know subgrantees’ core information including stories, grant requirements and commitments made, budgets, theories of change and logic models, performance measurements, and evaluation plans.
- *State Context:* Staff should understand and be able to convey information about their state’s overall context including demographics, community needs, key leaders and institutions, notable alumni, and the political climate (past and present) with regard to AmeriCorps and programmatic support.

CNCS also expects staff to acquire and develop **skills** that are associated with the AmeriCorps functions of the commission role. These include championing national service relentlessly; enforcing national service laws and regulations to ensure compliance; striving for continuous improvement at commission and subgrantee levels; providing high quality training and technical assistance to potential and existing subgrantees; communicating complex information; documenting and maintaining records, expenditures, and actions; and working effectively with ambiguity.

Key Information for the First Week and Month

CNCS recognizes that each organization has its own orientation protocol for new staff. To support state commissions in sharing critical AmeriCorps-related information with new hires, the CNCS team developed a suggested approach for covering specific material during a new hire’s first week and month and highlighted mission critical information. During the **first week**, CNCS recommends that new staff focus on preliminary information associated with the AmeriCorps

world including learning about prohibited and unallowable activities and how they apply to commissions and subgrantees; staff time rules, grant allocations, and timesheet procedures; and how to access information.

Then, during the **first month**, CNCS recommends that staff concentrate on learning about the structure of CNCS and AmeriCorps grantmaking, and what it's like to work closely with CNCS. New employees should become comfortable with the CNCS organizational chart and leadership, including how the different CNCS units interact and what it means to the commissions; who CNCS staff contacts are; what acronyms and terminology refer to; the types of prime grantees and grants; and the CNCS grantmaking cycle. Key points include:

- **Agency Overview:** CNCS is an independent federal government agency led by a bipartisan Board of Directors whose members are nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate. The board sets the overall policy and direction for the agency and its programs and provides guidance to the agency's CEO, who is also nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate. The CEO oversees the agency which includes about 500 employees operating throughout the US and its territories.
- **Points of Contact with CNCS:** There are three key points of contact for state commissions;
 - o *Program Officer (PO):* Serves as the primary point of contact with CNCS, supports the implementation of commission responsibilities, monitors grantees, and helps resolve issues that arise concerning grants. POs serve as grantee champions and should be copied on **all** communication with CNCS and engaged on a minimum monthly basis to share news and updates, stories, reports, and more.
 - o *Grant Officer (GO):* Works in the CNCS Office of Grants Management and maintains responsibility for fiscal issues concerning grants, reviews federal financial reports (FFRs), and monitors financial management systems for compliance with AmeriCorps requirements.
 - o *Trust Officer:* Works in the National Service Trust and serves as the primary contact for issues related to the education award.
- **Prime Grantee Types:** AmeriCorps State and National provides grants to nonprofits, faith-based and secular community-based organizations, government agencies, Indian tribes, and institutions of higher education.
- **CNCS Grantmaking Cycle:** There are five key steps in the federal grantmaking process:
 - 1) The *Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)* outlines guidelines for grant submission.
 - 2) The *Grant Application Review Process (GARP)* is a multi-month stage that begins upon receipt of the grant application and often includes both CNCS staff reviewers and external reviewers.
 - 3) The *Notice of Grant Awards (NGA)* is issued by CNCS via eGrants upon determination of grants.
 - 4) *Monitoring and Reporting* is conducted by CNCS throughout the grantee activity cycle.
 - 5) *Close-Out and Audit* begin once grant funds are expended and activities are concluded and recorded.
- **Grant Cycles:**
 - o *Competitive Cycle:* This is an opportunity for all commissions, national programs, and multi state programs and tribes to apply for grant funds.
 - o *Formula Cycle:* This cycle is specific to state commissions and is focused on funds designated via the annual federal appropriations process for state grants. It is a separate and distinct process from the competitive cycle.
 - o *Special cycle:* This category includes grants that have been designated specifically for commissions: the commission support grants, the commission investment funds, and the volunteer generation funds. This also includes new funding priorities for national/multi-state or tribal programs. As funds are designated for targeted priorities, CNCS will issue a NOFO for the special competition grant cycle.

For More Information

- [CNCS Email List Sign Up](#) (use the link in the lower right corner that says 'Sign up to stay informed!')
- [Managing AmeriCorps Grants](#)
- [Grant Terms and Conditions](#)
- [Grantee Program Report Resources](#)
- [AmeriCorps State and National Knowledge Network](#)