Orientation for New Program Staff

Webinar Session Highlights (June 14, 2018)

Given the dual role that AmeriCorps State and National programs play as both CNCS partners and prime grantees, paired with the critical leadership role of AmeriCorps program staff in program and service delivery and grant management, CNCS developed this webinar. Focused on CNCS- and AmeriCorps-related topics for new AmeriCorps program staff and the individuals who organize new employee orientations, the session provided an overview of key knowledge and skills needed by program staff to be effective AmeriCorps grant managers and CNCS partners; highlighted important information that new program staff need in their first week and month on the job; and shared best practices and lessons learned from AmeriCorps program staff at a prime grantee organization.

Speakers:

Curtis Cannon, Program Officer, AmeriCorps State and National
Natalia Lopez, Senior Program Officer, International Rescue Committee
Fiorella Morales, Volunteer Operations Manager, International Rescue Committee
Barbara Reynolds, Senior Program and Project Specialist, AmeriCorps State and National

Knowledge and Skills Required

CNCS identified several broad categories of **knowledge** that program 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, region, and the broader national network.
- *Community Context*: Staff should understand and be able to convey information about the context of the community in which their program operates including demographics, community needs, existing resources to support the program, and key contacts and leaders in the community.
- *Program Overview*: Staff should know the ins and outs of their own program including its history and evolution, grant requirements and commitments made in approved program grants, budgets and financial management processes, program/agency board, organizational context, and grant cycle.
- *Program Requirements Overview*: Staff should know the program's theory of change and logic models; performance measures and evaluation requirements of subgrantees; challenges, successes, and lessons learned from each program grant cycle; and performance data collection and use practices for program improvement.
- *AmeriCorps Service Members*: Staff should know basic demographics of the group, details on members' positions and service activities, performance results during the service term, and members' plans for life after AmeriCorps.

CNCS also expects staff to acquire and develop **skills** that are associated with the AmeriCorps functions of the program staff role. These include championing national service relentlessly; enforcing national service laws and regulations to ensure compliance; striving for continuous improvement; 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 program staff 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 program staff and members; staff time rules and timesheet procedures; relevant CNCS personnel; eGrants account setup; and how to access CNCS-specific information (e.g. getting on the ASN listserv and navigating the CNCS website and Knowledge Network).

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 AmeriCorps programs; who CNCS staff contacts are; what acronyms and terminology refer to; how the relationship with CNCS works; the types of prime grantees; and the general 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 AmeriCorps program staff:
    - *Program Officer (PO)*: Manages a portfolio of direct grantees, serves as their primary CNCS point of contact and grant champion, supports the implementation of program responsibilities, monitors grantee performance, connects grantees with resources and opportunities to support their work, and helps resolve issues that arise concerning grants. POs should be copied on <u>all</u> communication with CNCS and engaged on a minimum monthly basis to share news and updates, stories, reports, and more.
    - *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.
    - *National Service Trust Officer*: Works in the National Service Trust and serves as the primary contact for issues related to the education award including forbearance, education award payments, and student loan interest payments.
- *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:*
    - *Competitive Cycle*: This is an opportunity for national and multi-state programs and tribes to apply for grant funds.
    - *Formula Cycle*: This cycle is specific to state commissions and is focused on funds designated via the annual federal appropriations process for state grants.
    - *Special cycle:* This category includes new funding priorities for national and multi-state or tribal programs. As funds are designated for targeted priorities, CNCS will issue a NOFO for the special competition grant cycle. These grants vary in both timing and amount of funds for allocation.

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