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# National Institute of Justice

*Research in Action*

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# AMERICORPS

## A Call to Service

by Attorney General Janet Reno

**O**n September 21st, President Clinton signed an historic piece of legislation into law—the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. National Service will offer thousands of Americans opportunities to address four priorities—public safety, education, human needs, and the environment—as part of a national service corps, AmeriCorps. In its first year, 20,000 service workers of all ages will engage in substantive, skill-building work in our Nation's communities through AmeriCorps. By 1996, service workers will number 100,000. Retired police officers and teachers will serve side by side with our Nation's youth, rebuilding America in the new AmeriCorps.

In exchange for their service, AmeriCorps participants will receive an educational award that will help defray the costs of post-secondary education, as well as a modest stipend. Why should criminal justice practitioners take notice of AmeriCorps? For a number of very important reasons.

### Significance of AmeriCorps

First, at a time when local resources are limited, AmeriCorps can help fill the gaps in the continuum of public safety services. AmeriCorps, working alongside our public safety providers, can help provide more comprehensive and integrated services

with respect to crime prevention, police protection, crime victim assistance, and community-based public safety services in urban and rural communities all across the country.

Second, AmeriCorps will re-engage some of our Nation's youth. We all decry overcrowded juvenile detention facilities, jails, and prisons. We must begin to think about our young not only at the point when they have come in contact with the criminal justice system but before, well before. Through service, AmeriCorps will instill a sense of citizenship in our youth. They will learn skills, access a path to a better life through education—not drugs, crime, and violence.

Third, National Service is not just another top-down, bureaucratic government answer to the problems of our Nation's communities. Local entities such as police departments, victim service agencies, community-based prevention organizations, prosecutor and defender offices, treatment, and community and institutional corrections agencies can apply to participate.

## **Criminal justice and AmeriCorps**

A diverse group of practitioners has already suggested the following ways in which AmeriCorps can work with the criminal justice system to amplify public safety services:

Police practitioners have suggested AmeriCorps workers can help move community policing efforts forward. They can be trained to conduct community surveys of neighborhood crime and disorder, work on projects to prevent victimization of seniors, develop residential and commercial crime prevention workshops, and staff community policing neighborhood substations which will begin to bridge the gap between scarce police resources and legitimate neighborhood demands. In addition, through AmeriCorps, local police departments can establish a pre-professional police corps consisting of a cadre of high-quality local recruits.

Court administrators, prosecutors, and judges have suggested that AmeriCorps workers can help make the criminal justice system more accessible to the community by staffing neighborhood courts, assisting domestic violence victims to navigate the court system, and representing abused and neglected children as court-appointed advocates.

Victim assistance providers have proposed that AmeriCorps workers take part in the movement towards restorative justice. They could monitor community restitution programs, staff victim's desks in neighbor-

hood courts, and coordinate victim counseling volunteers.

Community and institutional correctional personnel have suggested that AmeriCorps workers help prepare offenders scheduled for release to make the transition to a drug-free, crime-free life. They can teach offenders basic reading, math, and computer literacy skills, train offenders in marketable jail industries areas like data management, construction, and the automotive trades.

These examples are offered as a beginning, serving as a series of creativity generators as we launch the first generation of AmeriCorps workers.

## **Operational issues**

Now, how will AmeriCorps work? Here are a few of the particulars. A Federal corporation, the Corporation for National and Community Service, will function as a clearinghouse of information and technical expertise for service initiatives nationwide and, as a service "venture capitalist," provide funding on a competitive basis for local, State, and national service programs.

States will be asked to set up bipartisan commissions to receive AmeriCorps funds. One-third of overall program funding—as much as \$50 million in the first year—will go by formula grant to States. The second third will be awarded to States on a competitive basis. The remaining third will be administered by the Corporation in its "venture capitalist" capacity; some additional funds will be available for training and technical assistance.

Organizations and government entities applying for participation in National Service through AmeriCorps will be encouraged to form private/public partnerships to help financially support their programs. The Corporation will pay up to 85 percent of a modest salary (roughly minimum wage) for AmeriCorps participants, 85 percent of health-care costs, 75 percent of other operating costs, 100 per-

cent of eligible child-care costs, and an educational award of nearly \$5,000 for each year of service, up to two years. Programs may elect to pay participants more than minimum wage (at their own expense) with some restrictions.

Regulations will be set forth for the new Corporation over the next few months. Sometime early next year, applications will be available to cities, counties, police and sheriff's departments, district attorneys, courts, judges, wardens, not-for-profits, and all others eligible to apply for planning, operating, or replication grants.

## **A call for your participation**

Over the coming months, you will be hearing more about AmeriCorps and the opportunities it offers our communities to re-engage through service, citizenship, skill-building work, and education. Between now and the new year, as program regulations are outlined and State commissions are set up, I encourage you and your communities to look closely at AmeriCorps to help your neighborhoods meet critical, unmet public safety needs. You will lead the wave as the first AmeriCorps workers hit the streets in the summer of 1994.

For more information about National Service, write to:

The Corporation for National and  
Community Service  
1100 Vermont Avenue, NW.  
Washington, DC 20525

*The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.*

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