



**Forum on  
National Service and  
Community-based  
Rural Development**

**St. Paul, Minnesota  
November 17, 2004**



## Forum Cosponsors:

Rural School and Community Trust  
National Rural Funders Collaborative  
Northwest Area Foundation  
Regional Rural Development Centers  
Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI)  
CFED  
Rural LISC  
The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire

### **About ICP:**

Innovations in Civic Participation (ICP) is a non-profit social change organization that provides expertise, ideas, information, and advocacy support in the United States and around the world to develop and strengthen policies and programs that promote political and civic engagement through service. In 2003, ICP hosted a forum in Washington, D.C. on the impacts of national service on three critical social issues -- youth development in out-of-school hours, rural development, and helping seniors live independently. In 2004, three leadership conferences were held to focus on service as a strategy in each of these issue areas, culminating in a Congressional policy briefing in December 2004. For more information, visit [www.icicp.org](http://www.icicp.org).

This report was prepared by Anne Lewis with the assistance of Grace Hollister of Innovations in Civic Participation, January 2005.

Photos courtesy of the Resource Assistance for Rural Environments program at the University of Oregon.





## Introduction

Every community is unique, but the nation's underdeveloped rural areas share devastating circumstances and persistent problems that local effort cannot easily overcome. A combination of poverty and insufficient community infrastructures contributes to a lack of adequate housing and essential services such as health care, childcare, education, and youth development. Once the pride and backbone of rural areas, natural environments in many areas have been seriously depleted or destroyed by industrial development. Compounding these problems is the absence of adequate transportation systems and communications services.

No single reason explains why so many people in rural areas have been unable to overcome poverty. In many rural communities, human capital is underdeveloped, and, consequently, businesses with stable jobs do not invest in them. The individual assistance the rural poor receive does not build community assets. In addition, rural areas often suffer from a lack of investment in young people and their careers and lingering class, race, economic, and social divisions. It is just as true that no single solution for rural poverty exists. Various aspects of national service, however, have proven to be successful catalysts for community-based strategies that offer hope and opportunities for the rural poor.

ICP's Forum on National Service and Community-based Rural Development brought together national service experts with national and local rural development leaders to make specific recommendations about how national service can help communities to build the capacity needed to break this cycle.

The November 2004 forum built upon work that began in May 2003, when a smaller group of leaders met to discuss position papers and develop an agenda on the role of an expanding national service sector in meeting critical needs. Goals for the 2004 forum included illustrating the potential of service as a strategy for rural development with examples of effective national service programs; encouraging the rural and service communities to exchange information about what works and to work together more closely; and developing policy recommendations for funders and policymakers.

This is a report of ICP's Forum on National Service and Community-based Rural Development, including presentations, panel discussions of exemplary programs, and reports from small group sessions on next steps and recommendations to policymakers about how national service can be a more effectively used resource to address the needs of rural communities.



## Opening Session

The Northwest Area Foundation in St. Paul, Minnesota, host for the forum, provided a fitting environment as Jean Burkhardt, Horizon Program Lead for the foundation, described the Horizon initiative to develop leadership in small rural areas. Working with 32 diverse communities, including one-third Native American and two Latino, the Horizon program, she said, "is seeing what can be done on systems change around leadership in order to change these communities."

On the same theme, Susan Stroud, executive director of Innovations in Civic Participation, described the forum as an opportunity to see what can be done by using national service as a lens on the important issues of rural development. "We can focus on the impact that national and community service programs have had on important social issues in communities all across the country," she said, noting that the forum was being held in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the first grants under the Corporation for National and Community Service.

To frame the discussions at the forum, professor Mil Duncan, director of the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire, addressed the meaning of development in a rural context. First, however, she reminded participants of the many stereotypes about "rural." Everyone knows it when they see it, she said, "countryside and open spaces, small town living, natural resource-based economies like farming forests, fisheries, and ranching; places city folks escape to, places country folks escape from." For some, rural communities are seen as nostalgic, "small towns where people know one another and look out for one another."

Duncan pointed out, however, that there is a dark side to the stereotyping. Rural places also are described as "backward, where people are ignorant and simple, where the small town is a trap or a straitjacket, putting a break on innovation and difference." People who work in rural development, however, "are clear and articulate about the character of rural communities and about the challenges they face in this globalizing market economy and shrinking commitment to public investment," according to Duncan. Also, rural areas are not all alike, with some losing population, others gaining. Indeed, migration in and out of rural places "is the barometer for forecasting change." Younger people move for opportunity, and those opportunities

have changed since the 1960s and 1970s when dramatic positive social and economic gains occurred in rural areas. People are looking for the “economic engine” that will bring or restore lifeblood to the community, “jobs that will provide a livable wage...not just fast food and Wal-Mart, not just blueberry picking in summer and wreath making in winter.”

Persistently poor and underdeveloped communities, Duncan said, are places where: many people lack skills and education, many young people are disengaged from

*“People who work in rural development are clear and articulate about the character of rural communities and about the challenges they face in this globalizing market economy and shrinking commitment to public investment.”*

Mil Duncan

the mainstream, housing is deteriorating and substandard, drug and alcohol abuse is a difficult problem, often environmental toxics and pollution have ravaged the landscape, and schools “are broken, often corrupt, and where local government, too, may be corrupt or inept.” In such communities, she added, people do not trust each other and leadership fails to emerge to challenge the forces that have allowed these conditions to arise.

Her studies of rural communities found real differences based on the extent of the middle class, the people who normally are at the heart of communities’ civic life. These are the people who coach, volunteer, debate issues and become the “civic engine.” Poor places have too few of these salt-of-the earth civic players. “They have left to find a good life for their families,” Duncan said.

Development is needed to counter the poverty, Duncan asserted, but by “development,” she means “deep and wide investment in a community, not just profits for some and low-wage jobs for others.” The investment must lead to equity and to a chance to enter the middle class.

Development also is a political process in that it requires citizen engagement in decision making. Duncan has created the idea of a community “cultural tool kit” with three dimensions – trust, participation, and community investment. A partnership between the community service world and the rural development world can “broaden the cultural tool kit of those who feel stuck in remote places where times are hard and opportunities limited,” she said. Another reason for such a partnership “is the power these change agents bring to local leadership, providing forces for voice and engagement and building the civic culture of rural communities.”

Rachel Tompkins, president of the Rural School and Community Trust, also addressed some of the stereotypes about rural areas and provided hopeful comments on the potential of national service to build or rebuild a sense of community in poor rural areas. “The important context to keep in mind is

the diversity in rural America,” she said. Only four states (Vermont, Maine, West Virginia, and Mississippi), for example, have a majority of residents who are rural. The least rural states are New Jersey, California, and Nevada, the latter being a “big state with few people.”

With such diversity, “we can’t get anything done in rural areas without coalitions,” Tompkins said. At the national level, rural community interests “are shoehorned into the farm bill every five years,” but advocates keep working on guiding the federal government toward a larger role in rural America. The one initiative that “gets it,” is national service, she said.

Tompkins asked the participants to envision what could happen if national service focused on building assets in rural communities rather than on deficits. What if the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) had a focus on rural regional development with people working on health, community development, and encouraging a rural voice? What if a national service program focused on developing community leadership in communities with a population under 5,000 like those in the Northwest Area Foundation’s Horizon program? What if the state commissions of the CNCS focused on rural development in a state structure? What if national service

were leveraged to inspire hope in places where people have become fatalistic because of population decline?

Tompkins admitted that these “often are discouraging times for people in rural America, but,” she added, “decline and growth come in cycles, and the contexts are changing in such places as those impacted by a growing immigrant population or high birth rates.”

### **Service As a Strategy: How National Service Programs Contribute to Building Rural Community Capacity**

Leading off a panel of presenters representing the scope of service strategies in rural areas, Kevin LaNave described an example of how two-year higher education institutions can take advantage of their close relationship with communities to shape service programs. Kevin is the coordinator of service-learning at the St. Cloud Technical College and founder/director of the Center for Service-Learning and Social Change.

#### **Panel members:**

Jean Burkhardt  
*Horizons Program Lead*  
Northwest Area  
Foundation

Kevin LaNave  
*Coordinator of Service-  
Learning*  
St. Cloud Technical  
College

Megan Smith  
*Director of RARE*  
University of Oregon

Jane Forrest Redfern  
*Executive Director*  
Rural Action

Sister Janice Otis  
*RSVP Director*  
Southeastern Idaho  
Community Action  
Agency

At the St. Cloud campus, LaNave links students and faculty with people from surrounding rural communities who are working on local issues. The college partnered with the city, for example, to build multi-family low-income housing and give students in the college's Construction Arts program hands-on experience. Two other programs at the college work with area high schools. Tech Prep allows students in the high schools to take college-level courses or work toward occupational certificates. The Discovery Academy sends faculty out to rural high schools to provide academic courses students need to be ready for college.

### **A State Commitment**

The service programs at St. Cloud Technical College draw from a Community Development Initiative of the Minnesota Campus Compact. This state compact of 48 college and university campuses pledges the leadership of the colleges and universities to engage students and faculty in service. The Community Development Initiative is one part of the Minnesota Compact's strategic plan and is aimed at mobilizing resources across campuses to strengthen communities.

The Initiative is working on several development issues, including purchasing goods from local communities, as is the plan at St. Cloud; channeling investment dollars to community development; linking the skills and expertise of campus staff/faculty with community-based organizations; creating shared use and other real estate investments in communities; working with schools on youth development; providing workforce development training through community partnerships; hiring from the community; and supporting community planning and neighborhood development.

### **RARE Successes**

Graduate students from all over the country who are interested in rural development get hands-on opportunities through the University of Oregon's RARE program. Its director, Megan Smith, has many stories about how the students' year of field experiences as AmeriCorps members in the state's rural areas made significant contributions to local rural development.

One student from New Jersey, for example, found herself working with three rural communities with large influxes of Hispanic immigrants. She developed a program on home ownership, educating the residents on such issues as predatory lending, and organized a culture fair for the community. A student from Chicago, working with eastern Oregon American Indian tribes, interviewed elders whose stories had not yet been recorded and helped tribe members develop cultural sites to promote tourism.

Graduate students in the Resource Assistance for Rural Environments Program (RARE) at the University of Oregon spend a year in the field as AmeriCorps members working on rural development projects. According to Megan Smith, director of the program, RARE was one of the earliest AmeriCorps projects and has been a steady partner with communities

throughout changes that have occurred in the state's economy.

"We work closely with the students in the field to make sure they get a holistic view of rural communities," Smith said. The students become involved in resource management, environment issues, and housing. She serves as a bridge between the program and state policymaking, keeping abreast of such issues as saving salmon in watersheds and rejuvenation of communities affected by the loss of the timber industry.

The founders of Rural Action in southern, Appalachian Ohio "decided they could not continue to battle against development," according to Jane Forrest Redfern, executive director. "We needed to look at the future, so we developed a Rural Renewal Strategy, much of which has been accomplished." In 2004 Rural Action celebrated 10 years of their involvement with AmeriCorps\*VISTA volunteer program; these national service participants have manned many of the strategies including watershed renewals in the 14-county region, organizing volunteers for community projects, and helping to foster economic development based on local resources such as growing wild American ginseng. Some recent initiatives piloted by AmeriCorps\*VISTA volunteers are the Citizen Environmental Monitoring Project and a communications team that organized a radio show and promoted environmental and other community issues through local newspapers. The work has been so successful that Rural Action recently convened more than 150 people from all over Appalachia to share ideas on monitoring the environment. More than 200 AmeriCorps\*VISTA members have served Rural Action, and six new members recently started training. Their new focus

**VISTAs in Rural Action**  
Since the multi-program efforts of Rural Action began using AmeriCorps\*VISTA volunteers 10 years ago, 238 volunteers have provided the equivalent of more than 264 years of service to the Appalachian area of southern Ohio. In the fall of 2004, there were 27 AmeriCorps\*VISTA volunteers working on various Rural Action projects.

AmeriCorps\*VISTA Leaders, usually two at a time, serve in different offices of Rural Action to develop volunteer activities, promote the Rural Action work, and recruit new AmeriCorps\*VISTA members.

Another source of volunteers for Rural Action is the AmeriCorps\*NCCC program, which sends in large teams for four months to work on special projects such as Rural Action's research and education center.

Ten years ago an AmeriCorps\*VISTA volunteer started the Monday Creek Restoration Project, which has steadily improved the waterways in a 116-square mile area of southern Ohio. The project is recognized as a leader in environmental and community improvement.

will be on youth services, using grants to fund service-learning in schools and to help young people conduct environmental education projects. Redfern said that AmeriCorps\*VISTA members are helping to build organizational capacity as well; they developed a fund raising strategy to help Rural Action meet a matching-fund challenge grant, and the strategy ultimately resulted in more than \$170,000 in pledges.

As director of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) of the Southeastern Idaho Community Action Agency, Sister Janice Otis travels many miles to support several essential support services for the elderly, families, and children. Her agency covers seven counties and 11,000 square miles, and her program manages services at 110 sites. The senior volunteers in her program tutor American Indian children and organize health management projects such as filling out forms and working with doctors to allow people to qualify for medical services. In both of these programs, RSVP volunteers are training local community people to carry out the projects themselves.

RSVP volunteers helped one small community save its school. The local high school was threatened with closure when only seven children were left in the school. The community wanted to prevent them having to commute 50 miles to the nearest school, so RSVP volunteers mentor in classes and joined with the agency's Office on Aging and the school district to open up a café at the school for lunch for everyone in the community and to sponsor athletic activities for all. The program is now feeding more than 55 people every day.

With only four people on her staff, "we have a lot to do, but we are hanging in there," Sister Otis said.

#### **Senior Help for Children**

RSVP volunteers in southeast Idaho mentor students in 25 schools and involve them in community service projects in veterans' homes, parks, and other sites. Their newest mentoring project concerns the children of parents who are incarcerated in area prisons. The agency conducted an independent survey, according to RSVP's director, Sister Janice Otis, and found that more than 4,000 children in southeast Idaho have at least one incarcerated parent. In some schools close to prisons, up to 75 percent of the children have an incarcerated parent. RSVP volunteers are conducting out-of-school projects with the children such as taking them to events, games, and movies. They also are training mentors to provide out-of-school companionship for children.

## Discussion on the Panel Presentations

The four examples of service in rural areas exemplified how ideas can come together, panel moderator Jean Burkhardt said, when “there is a vision and there are volunteers who can do community development.”

David Eisner, CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), led off the question-and-answer session by asking why their programs using national service are more successful than others.

The overall answer was that the programs are grounded in community. “Rural people are resentful of people coming in from the outside,” said Sister Otis. “We try to empower those in rural communities to be responsible.” Jane Forrest Redfern said that volunteers working in Rural Action are seen as change agents. “Our volunteers bring people together to make things happen, but the strategies are developed within the community,” she explained, “and [AmeriCorps\*]VISTA volunteers are there to help people get things done that they want done.”

While RARE at the University of Oregon is not rurally located, “we are adamant that projects are locally developed,” Megan Smith said. Kevin LaNave of St. Cloud noted that “the people we work with have assets and capacities, and our role is to be partners.” Sometimes, he advised, it is a delicate task to maintain what people are doing yet stimulate a vision.

Another question concerned the prevalence and viability of cost sharing. Rural Action has moved to cost sharing with projects that receive watershed improvement grants. Redfern noted that when communities invest in improvement, “they see that they can make a difference.” Smith said her program uses many funding sources, such as CNCS, state agencies, foundations, and local community sources, which sometimes “makes it difficult to say what the long-range impact of a particular program has been.”

One long-term impact that CNCS could study, suggested Rachel Tompkins, would be what happens to AmeriCorps\*VISTA members after their term of service. Medical interns often settle where they do residency, she noted, and several of the programs mentioned hiring former AmeriCorps\*VISTA volunteers.



## CNCS: Seeking a Role in Rural America

While participation in CNCS programs are at an historically high level, “we really don’t know what we are doing in rural America,” David Eisner, CEO of CNCS, admitted during his presentation at a working lunch. Several months prior to the forum he asked his staff to compile statistics on program sites and found out that “by and large, we are not in rural America even though our anecdotal information and mission on anti-poverty would lead us to think we were in rural areas more.” Eisner said he was also “disappointed” on CNCS’s record in impoverished communities.

One problem is determining which programs actually are serving in rural communities, Eisner said. “We assume by the addresses, so we could be doing more, but we don’t know. If we require additional information, we will hear objections [from program directors].” Also, he said it was difficult to determine the impact of some of the programs, especially when they are involved in cost sharing. Such arrangements are initially difficult for local organizations, he believes, “but after a few years people say programs are more valued because of the cost sharing,” due to community buy-in.

Eisner was surprised at some of the data collected by CNCS. “When I started this job,” [in December 2003] he said, “I thought nonprofits we serve, especially in rural areas, would be modest sized. Instead, the smallest ones represent only 15 percent, and the average annual budget of all the nonprofits is \$1.5 million.” He believes that the difficulty of the initial application process and required paperwork over the course of the grant, as well as cost sharing and matching requirements, is pushing smaller agencies away. However, “when we dig down, we find that the field has been effective in using grants to intermediary organizations, and there are several models for taking national service dollars and pushing them out to communities.”

*“By and large, we are not in rural America even though our anecdotal information and mission on anti-poverty would lead us to think we were in rural areas more.”*

David Eisner

While the burdensome requirements need to be fixed, Eisner acknowledged, he still wants to know if rural communities like the intermediary process. Finding out what this infrastructure means to rural communities “is absolutely necessary,” he said.

Eisner raised additional questions that require investigation on the part of CNCS. Can we piece together how state agencies are working with rural communities? Do the agencies tell rural communities what to do or do they respond to them? What is the right role for volunteer centers in rural communities? What can we learn from United Ways and from Campus Compacts on designing strategies at the national level but applying them locally?

CNCS considers state agencies, Campus Compacts, and state CNCS commissions as the network it relates to, but Eisner asked if there were an analogous network around rural development, "a partner that the Corporation can link up with?"

The big question for CNCS right now is how to include rural development in its strategic plan. Eisner said the Corporation is selecting focus areas for the next five years such as independent living for seniors, mentoring, community volunteering, non-corporation investment in service, and tapping baby boomers to volunteer. He asked the group to consider whether rural development should be included as a focus area, or as a cross-cutting issue.

In closing, Eisner stated three certainties in national service:

- Top-down doesn't work and bottom-up doesn't scale. "We have to figure out a way in community after community to develop local resources."
- We make an error if we decide that service is really about changing the lives of service participants, or about building communities, or about building the capacity of nonprofits to carry on the work. "We have come to the conclusion that we can't choose. Each is related to the others." Service cannot be reduced to a business model, he added, and service participants must not be used to reduce labor costs.
- National service and community volunteers must not be described as indistinguishable from each other. If benefits are provided for some, this will seem as inequitable, but consider the fact that 450 AmeriCorps members trained 150,000 community volunteers for Habitat for Humanity. Also, AmeriCorps\*VISTA volunteers and community volunteers may be working together, but they are very different species, he said.

Rachel Tompkins expressed the sentiment of most of those attending the forum – that CNCS should support a separate rural focus rather than disperse rural interest among other tracks. "Ten years ago," she noted, "I would have advised against a separate rural emphasis, but rural people have

built structures to use.” Jane Forrest Redfern added that “rural people will make you feel good and make the dollars go far. Only a small percentage are left on farms, but rural people are caretakers of the land, air, and water for everyone else.” Jean Burkhardt stated, however, that capacity building is still a major issue because while regional infrastructures are coming into place, much of local structures need to be rebuilt. Currently, she said, “a huge amount of volunteer time in rural areas is taken up with health emergencies, and we are learning that the bottom up wants to network and collaborate” to develop more useful partnerships. Networking, commented Eisner, is a good role for the Corporation.

*“Ten years ago, I would have advised against a separate rural emphasis (in CNCS), but rural people have built structures to use.”*

Rachel Tompkins



## Small Group Discussions

Three small discussion groups integrated the presentations and speakers' remarks with work already done at the 2003 meeting to develop recommendations for actions that would raise the importance of the issue and to help others understand the important strategy that national service represents to deal with community-based development in rural areas.

The three issues covered in the group discussions included:

- Creating linkages between service resources and rural development groups
- Developing new service initiatives to target specific rural development needs
- Supporting regional rural development efforts through service

The task for the small group sessions was to determine: *Are these the right strategies? What other strategies make sense? Which strategies are most promising? What concrete steps could happen right now to move this agenda forward? What could your organization do to help?*

At the end of the afternoon, the three groups met together to report out their findings, and to share their thoughts for the future.

**Creating linkages  
between service  
resources and  
rural development  
groups**

**The challenge:** Rural communities face a unique set of challenges: often located in remote areas with inadequate public infrastructure, rural communities have few organizations involved in the provision of necessary services. Problems resulting from limited health care, child care, education, and other essential services are compounded by a lack of transportation and often by declining investment opportunities. National and community service programs have made advances in rural areas by providing resources for locally driven community rebuilding opportunities. In order for service programs to increase their potential for positive rural development, more linkages need to be created between the financial and skill development resources that national and community service are able to provide, and the rural communities lacking in these areas.

**The opportunity:** All streams of national service programs - Learn and Serve America, AmeriCorps, and Senior Corps, create new and expanded leadership opportunities and contribute to increasing social capital in rural communities. Because service programs are locally driven, they are designed to address the needs of the individual rural communities in which they operate. Expanding the number of service programs in rural areas will also create additional opportunities for youth development, encouraging older people to serve and young people to become more deeply involved in their own communities and counteracting the "brain drain" phenomenon that plagues rural areas.

**The question:** What are the barriers to better links between rural development groups and national service resources? Is it lack of knowledge? Is it understanding of application processes? Is it too much paperwork, required

Group I Participants:

Bridget Britz,  
*Horizon Health, Inc.*

Marie Cirillo,  
*Woodland Community Land Trust*

David Eisner,  
*Corporation for National and Community Service*

Dan Foster,  
*Initiative Foundation*

John Hamerlink,  
*Minnesota Campus Compact*

Randal Hemmerlin,  
*Minnesota Housing Partnership*

Kevin LaNave,  
*St. Cloud Technical College*

Marcie McLaughlin,  
*RUPRI*

Sister Janice Otis,  
*Southeastern Idaho Community Action Agency*

Mikki Sager,  
*The Conservation Fund*

Liz Santigati,  
*South Carolina Coastal CDC*

Mary Terry, *Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project*

Nathan Thompson, *North Saint Louis County Habitat for Humanity*

meetings and rules? Is it a lack of match between priorities of national service and needs of rural places? Is it the scale of proposals required?

**Strategies:** National service offers participants an intensive, experiential opportunity to learn skills that will contribute to community development. These individuals have already shown their interest and commitment to helping others, and have a realistic picture of the work rural development entails. More effort should be made to connect rural development organizations with national and community service resources. The following strategies have been suggested for the creation of linkages between rural development groups and service resources:

- Increasing opportunities for dialogue between rural development groups, funders and policy makers and national and community service staff and practitioners.
- Sharing effective practices by promoting the successful work of national service programs in rural communities and articulating how national service targets specific development needs.
- Rethinking current provisions in national service legislation to account for rural-specific obstacles, such as recruitment, costs per member, limited terms of service, and volunteer generation.
- Expanding the number of advocates for positive rural development policy by reaching out to national service alumni who served in rural communities; strengthening the civic training provided through national service programs; creating stronger partnerships between policy and advocacy organizations and national service programs and alumni groups; and expanding leadership training opportunities for promising national service participants interested in remaining in the rural development field.

**Discussion:** Emphasizing that creating opportunities for dialogue between the various stakeholders must precede all other strategies, Eisner asked if there were a robust network for rural development similar to the one that exists to support service. Discussants generally said that there certainly were many local and regional networks, but there is less evidence of national players recognized by practitioners. The U.S. Department of Agriculture was not considered as filling that role on a national level. They cited several barriers to the development of networks. For one, people are simply too busy doing the work of rural community development to have time to organize and maintain networks. Also, groups working in the same places may see themselves in competition with others for limited funding resources.

The discussants agreed that promoting the successful work of national service programs in rural communities is often difficult because there is a lack of understanding of Corporation programs outside of the organizations

currently taking advantage of them. AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps\*VISTA alumni are considered to be underutilized, valuable assets who could sell the story of the relationship between service programs and developing communities.

Rural communities need much more technical assistance in gaining access to service programs, and discussants had several suggestions for eliminating barriers to national service programs in rural areas. One is to eliminate the rural/urban stipend differential, which provides larger stipends for national service program participants working in urban areas. Frequently, they said, it is more costly to live in a rural area due to transportation costs. Another barrier is the limit on the time national service volunteers can be assigned to an area. Real change, the group said, does not always happen within a three-year grant cycle. Too often, it was pointed out, communities are asked to come up with ideas for “new” programs and projects in order to receive funding when what they really need is support to sustain currently successful programs.

This discussion group recommended:

- Increase the opportunities for dialogue among all groups, ensuring that it takes place at the national level as well as at the community level.
- Provide mutually defined parameters of objectives for the networks that are trying to connect.
- Make sure that successful stories are shared with national policymakers, and though they may not be perfect, policymakers need to know that the programs are necessary and a great return on the taxpayer’s investment.
- Create opportunities for multi-year applications and grants.
- Eliminate the urban/rural stipend differential.
- Make greater attempts to recruit from the community rather than bringing volunteers to rural places.
- Use AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps\*VISTA alumni to sell the story of the value added by service volunteers in rural development.
- Identify additional opportunities for co-training of service volunteers and community development practitioners.

**Developing new  
service initiatives  
to target specific  
rural development  
needs**

**The challenge:** Rural communities face a unique set of challenges: often located in remote areas with inadequate public infrastructure, rural communities have few organizations involved in the provision of necessary services. Problems resulting from limited health care, child care, education, and other essential services are compounded by a lack of transportation and often by declining investment opportunities. National and community service programs have made advances in rural areas by providing resources for locally driven community rebuilding opportunities. Continuing progress in rural areas is reliant in large part upon the development of a rural specific initiative targeted at the needs endemic to these communities and the population currently residing therein.

**The opportunity:** All streams of national service programs - Learn and Serve America, AmeriCorps, and Senior Corps - create new and expanded leadership opportunities and contribute to increasing social capital in rural communities. AmeriCorps\*VISTA has had particular success in microenterprise development, community asset building, and youth entrepreneurship programs that could be used as models for a larger rural initiative. Service programs have created additional opportunities for youth development, encouraging young people to become more deeply involved in their own communities and counteracting the "brain drain" phenomenon that plagues rural areas.

**The question:** What new initiative might national service undertake that would most assist rural development efforts? Should there be a specific rural initiative? Should there be support for a certain sector such as entrepreneurship, perhaps targeting enterprises that are environmentally compatible, community public health, or building capacity for youth leadership and youth development? Should

Group II Participants:

Kathy Diel,  
*Western Dairyland RSVP*

Jill Hatfield,  
*Volunteer Services of Carlton County,  
Inc.*

Mavis Hill,  
*Tyrell County CDC*

Mark Langseth,  
*Minnesota Campus Compact*

Jane Leonard,  
*Minnesota Rural Partners*

Jonathan London,  
*Youth in Focus*

Karin Mack,  
*RSVP Volunteers United*

Jane Forrest Redfern,  
*Rural Action*

Jim Richardson,  
*National Rural Funders Collaborative*

Audrey Suker,  
*ServeMinnesota!*

Rachel Tompkins,  
*Rural School and Community Trust*

there be an emphasis on intergenerational work given the big increase in the elderly population in many rural regions?

**Strategies:** National service offers participants an intensive, experiential opportunity to learn skills that will contribute to community rebuilding. These individuals have already shown their interest and commitment to helping others, and will have a realistic picture of the work rural development entails. New initiatives can build off of successful programs to create more easily replicable models, models which can be adapted to specific rural communities with local support. Suggested strategies and programmatic possibilities include:

- Targeted development goals such as the development of human capital, building community infrastructure, and the creation of wealth through microenterprise development activities.
- Teacher support by national service members in rural communities where resources are extremely stretched.
- Service programs designed to involve older Americans, a sector of the population whose numbers will increase dramatically in the coming years.
- Expansion of the "professional corps" model to supply a skilled workforce to rural areas; hard-to-fill positions would be designated for AmeriCorps members who are paid regular salaries and receive education awards as added incentives.

**Discussion:** The group identified entrepreneurship among adults as a crucial area for new service initiatives. Any initiatives must nurture asset-based, local entrepreneurial spirit and skills, according to one participant. The overriding question, however, is what alternative economic base can be created in places like the Great Plains to move from an agricultural foundation to a more diverse economy? What new businesses, such as wind power, have the most promise?

Entrepreneurial activities need to mobilize low-income residents, it was pointed out, and that would require tapping into different federal resources. For example, programs in the Department of Labor could grow jobs through national service partnerships, allowing the unemployed in rural areas to still collect benefits while serving in AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps\*VISTA. Service could be a vehicle for single mothers and others in poverty to finance education and/or develop job skills, but service programs would need to be more flexible in rural areas in order to do this.

Another aspect of developing entrepreneurship is to use national service as a way to provide needed expertise, such as AmeriCorps\*VISTA volunteers serving as business facilitators to help businesses get off the ground. Developing entrepreneurs, however, is not just a matter of business skills,

one participant pointed out: "To seed entrepreneurial spirit locally, K-12 service-learning could help pique students' interest in community issues broadly, which might then create a more expansive local pool of folks who could go into AmeriCorps\*VISTA."

In a larger sense, some discussants said, poor rural areas need human resources to facilitate community planning processes. They suggested that grants for service program providers be more long term in order to provide continuity and that a professional corps of community developers could work alongside national service volunteers. These community developers could help negotiate stronger grant applications, increase the capacity of organizations and communities, and help with the local visioning process.

Another issue raised by the group is the need to change the outlook of policymakers from traditional social service-oriented programs for the poor to change-oriented, community development programs. The major strategy would be to "lock arms" with other government sources for rural areas to press for such changes in policies.

This discussion group recommended:

- Develop basic criteria for what constitutes excellence in national service/rural development partnerships while maintaining real flexibility for communities to define and address needs in their specific context.
- Provide planning grants for communities, followed by national service grants to carry out the plans.
- Develop a national service "package" application process that would allow a community to apply for AmeriCorps\*VISTA, AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve, and Senior Corps grants under an overall community plan.
- Convene 6-10 key national players in rural community development and national service to decide on: 1) key elements of rural community development; and 2) national service policies and other policy changes that would make a huge difference in promoting rural development.
- Designate rural development as a focus in the CNCS strategic plan.
- Adjust recruitment policies for national service to allow volunteers to come from the communities being served.
- Make regional projects and proposals a priority.

**Supporting  
regional rural  
development  
efforts through  
service**

**The challenge:** Rural communities face a unique set of challenges: often located in remote areas with inadequate public infrastructure, rural communities have few organizations involved in the provision of necessary services. Problems resulting from limited health care, child care, education, and other essential services are compounded by a lack of transportation and often by declining investment opportunities. National and community service programs have made advances in rural areas by providing resources for locally driven community rebuilding opportunities. National service is well positioned due to its ubiquity and substantial infrastructure on both the state and national level to make a substantive impact on a larger regional scale.

**The opportunity:** All streams of national service programs - Learn and Serve America, AmeriCorps, and Senior Corps, contribute to the creation of internal capacity through new and expanded leadership opportunities and by increasing social capital in rural communities. Because service programs are locally driven, they are designed to address the needs of the individual rural communities in which they operate. Expanding upon the local initiative model, regions with similar development and capacity needs could combine skill sets and national service resources to have greater impact on the communities they serve and leverage additional resources from outside entities.

**The question:** Are there ways that national service could support regional development efforts in rural areas? For example, the regional arts development work around Asheville, NC has helped develop tourism and arts assets in many small rural communities. Would a strategy of concentrating national service resources across streams of service, using both state and national resources, in particular regions to help develop the new organizational infrastructure make

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sense? Could this target some specific regions like the northern Great Plains or Central Appalachia or the Mid South Delta? Could one use a regional intermediary to manage such a process?

**Strategies:** National service offers participants an intensive, experiential opportunity to learn skills that will contribute to community development. These individuals have already shown their interest and commitment to helping others, and have a realistic picture of the work rural development entails. Focusing regional thinking around service programs could potentially increase the reach and effectiveness of service programs in rural areas. The following strategies have been suggested to support regional development efforts in rural areas:

- Build coalitions of organizations within a region to leverage resources focused on region-specific development needs.
- Devise strategies for national service programs to work together over the long-term, improving sustainability and ameliorating the problem of short-term service resources.
- Utilize current regional structures, such as school systems, as a platform for initiatives that can be expanded to multiple communities in a specific region.
- Assess common needs within a region, and design structured service initiatives to execute various tasks across community boundaries based on individual skill sets.

**Discussion:** Flexibility, time, and expertise on collaboration were the key policy issues discussed by the group as they considered regional strategies for rural development.

One area for greater flexibility is in federal agency regulations or statute barriers. For example, in earlier years, AmeriCorps members could be assigned to other federal agencies such as the Forest Service, but this was ended by statute. "If the U.S. Department of Agriculture has the skills and structure, why not use CNCS programs to enhance its work?" one participant asked.

Currently, too many programs in rural areas operate as silos, discussants said. Rural communities would benefit from a more comprehensive approach with consistent rules and recommendations from multiple streams of funding. National priorities beyond shared principles are not a "good sell" in rural communities, which prefer locally based priorities and decisions.

Rural development takes a long time, it was pointed out, and national service programs limited to three years "is a formula for wasting money," as

one discussant said. Trust building is a core need in rural communities, and that takes time. It can be aided by cost sharing, which requires communities to contribute their own investments. Also, institutions that can sustain progress usually do not exist in poor rural areas, so programs must be designed to build assets that allow sustainability, a strategy that may need to be done regionally rather than locally.

CNCS programs could promote sustainability by helping communities build common wealth. Traditional approaches to poverty, for example, often focus on amassing individual wealth, resulting in individuals with assets leaving the communities. The Nebraska Community Fund, for example, has started a campaign of "Come Back, Give Back," encouraging people to return or to return some of the wealth they have accumulated to the Fund to provide resources for youth programs and other investments.

As had the other discussion groups, the group endorsed the idea of developing leadership from the local community, selecting AmeriCorps\*VISTA volunteers, for example, who will stay and lead development. One Alaska village, for example, assigns medical assistants an elder as mentor, which encourages the young people to stay in the community.

The group discussed several aspects of regional approaches to development. Regional labor markets already exist, but communities need to know what to do when the economy changes. Communities need to find technical support for what they want to do, then integrate that resource with local service volunteers. Federal regulations should not lead to unnatural, gerrymandered regions, but it was pointed out that regional economic development may need to cross state lines. Community leadership also needs to identify regions with clear visions. National service programs could help communities develop vision, build capacity, and learn from and plan jointly with other communities. The Pew Partnership for Civic Change and the Kellogg Foundation were mentioned as good sources for developing regional leadership.

Many regional structures already exist that could be used by national service programs, including: university systems, YMCAs and Boys and Girls Clubs, school districts, economic development districts, resource conservation and development agencies/groups, Chambers of Commerce, and state regional structures.

CNCS needs to welcome entrepreneurship more in its request for proposals and seek local input. In northern Minnesota, for example, a focus group of 50 people was asked to identify the best facilitator for the AmeriCorps

program for the region. It rejected a more obvious candidate “because of its slow financial system” and selected the YMCA organization.

This discussion group recommended:

- Develop a regional assessment of common needs focused on a limited number of goals that are manageable.
- Make service programs more flexible to respond to rural needs across a region.
- Organize people on a collaborative basis across regions regularly, not just to initiate programs.
- Account for higher costs of service programs across rural regions because of travel, site visits, and dispersed training.
- Use higher education institutions and other resources to expand use of technology in rural areas that will break down the “silos” among programs and force their participation in networks.



## Concluding Discussion

David Eisner, Rachel Tompkins and Jean Burkhardt joined to comment on reports back from the three discussion groups at the forum's final session.

On the issue of creating linkages, Tompkins said she could easily gather "a half dozen rural leaders to sit down and talk to CNCS about the kind of service we need." Burkhardt said the initial focus of an expansion of service programs should be where volunteers "can make the most movement the fastest." Funders are looking for access into rural communities, she said, but many foundations will not go into dysfunctional communities, so national service volunteers should first help communities that are capable of attracting other resources. For Eisner, the linkage issue exists at two levels – policy and practice. He wanted to know with whom policy discussions should be undertaken to help develop an understanding of the mission of national service programs in rural areas. He saw a need to focus on training by first assessing what resources are available in rural areas for training and how best to use them.

The recommendation for a "package" approach to obtaining national service resources in rural areas met with different responses from the commentators. Tompkins said that rural leaders were getting better at taking a holistic approach to development and may be positioned to try an integrated service structure, which would "get more bang for the buck." Eisner, however, cautioned that the package idea cannot be implemented due to operational constraints. He endorsed the group's selection of the greatest areas of need (asset-based planning and development, entrepreneurship, and leadership development), saying "those are the issues we think are the highest order of priority for national service."

A focus on regional strategies needs intermediary steps, according to Eisner. Full-blown regional strategies would have prohibitive transaction costs, he said, but information sharing and building coalitions would be practical initiatives for national service participants. He and Tompkins stressed the recruitment of expertise, especially among "baby boomers," many of whom are returning to their home states. Under discussion at CNCS are initiatives in conjunction with businesses that would allow new hires one year of leave before their employment to do service work and make benefits packages more generous if employees participate in service during retirement.

Burkhardt noted that foundations stepped back from investment in national service once CNCS was established, but they could re-enter the field with a specific emphasis on providing expertise. Small communities, for example, could use volunteer “portfolio managers” to correspond with their development efforts, “and this might bring a lot of investors and foundations back into rural communities.”



## Summary of Policy Recommendations

### **Increase the share of Corporation for National and Community Service funds that support programs in rural areas by:**

Providing longer grant periods and exemptions to cost-per-member caps, minimum program size, and member term limitations that limit the impact of AmeriCorps in rural areas.

Making rural economic development, including a focus on asset based development, entrepreneurship, leadership and networking, a specific funding priority.

Establishing a process through state commissions to promote regional economic development, including sharing successful local practices.

Developing a consolidated application that would allow rural communities to access all national service funding through a single process.

Partnering with rural leadership groups and intermediaries, foundations and consortia of foundations with an interest in rural communities, and other federal agencies to integrate service into rural initiatives.

### **Use national service programs to build strong leadership in rural communities by:**

Offering leadership training to leaders and participants of rural service programs, and creating a new category of long-term service leaders who can support rural development initiatives.

Encouraging rural AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps\*VISTA programs to recruit locally, as national service participants often remain or return to rural communities as permanent residents.

Adding national service provisions to rural development legislation, such as the Homestead Act or the Rural Renaissance Initiative.

Increasing funding and support for rural youth corps programs that provide young people with job skills, education, life skills, leadership, and career development training.

Expanding the “professional corps” model to supply a skilled workforce to rural areas.

**Increase understanding of rural needs and assets by:**

Collecting and publicizing data and “stories” on rural areas, including information that quantifies the impact of service programs in rural areas.

Providing grants for service members to do asset mapping in rural communities and collect empirical data on rural economic development.



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