

Case Studies and Practices for Recruiting the Next Generation of Trail and Transportation Professionals

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Introduction

What is a Corps?

Corps are locally-based organizations that engage young adults (generally ages 16 - 25) and veterans (up to age 35) in service projects that address conservation, disaster response, and community needs. Through service to our country, Corps participants – or “Corpsmembers” – gain work experience and develop in-demand skills. Corpsmembers are compensated with a stipend or living allowance and often receive an education award or scholarship upon completing their term of service. Additionally, Corps provide educational programming, mentoring, and access to career and personal counseling.

By annually engaging thousands of young adults and veterans in education and service, Corps...

Increase access to public lands and waters

Build and enhance multiuse trails

Support productive fish and wildlife habitats

Increase recycling and revitalize neighborhoods

Restore communities and resources following disasters

Prevent and fight wildfires

Create and maintain parks and recreational spaces

Remove invasive species

Address the maintenance backlog on public lands

Weatherize homes for money-saving resource efficiency

Corps Outcomes FY22

- 445,021 acres of habitat restored
- 623,626 trees planted
- 124,206 acres of invasive species treated
- 227,665 volunteer service hours generated
- 93,871 acres of hazardous fire fuels retreated
- 12,791 miles of trail built or improved
- 9,853 industry-recognized certifications earned by Corpsmembers
- 2,892 miles of waterways restored

Why Partner with a Service and Conservation Corps?

Corps are a common-sense partner for transportation and resource management agencies. Corps are effective and show up ready to work. They manage their own crews, insurance, budgets, and recruitment. Engaging with Corps can help increase the capacity of transportation and resource management staff to focus on other priority areas. By bringing matching funds and community support to projects, Corps are cost-effective partners towards meeting transportation

and recreation priorities. For example, one federal land management agency found that using Corps saved, on average, 65 percent over using their own crews, and 83 percent over independent contractor crews. Ninety percent of 1,500 nationwide Corps project partners evaluated the work of Corps as “good or outstanding,” while virtually all federal project partners (99.6 percent) said they would work with Corps again. Additionally, partnering with Corps gives transportation agencies the chance to engage the next generation of diverse recreation professionals.

If you are a State Transportation or Trail Agency Representative...

Since the implementation of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) in 1998¹, the US Department of Transportation (USDOT) has been encouraging state transportation and recreation agencies to enter into contracts and cooperative agreements with qualified Service and Conservation Corps to perform appropriate projects. The Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) of 2012 expanded incentives to use Corps by allowing agencies to sole source contracts and cooperative agreements with qualified Corps.² The more than 140 Corps that make up The Corps Network collectively engage approximately 23,000 young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 and recent veterans up to age 35 each year. Of these Corpsmembers, 44 percent identify as female and 46 percent identify as persons of color. State agencies should view Corps as a pipeline to diverse and prepared candidates for available and hard-to-fill trail, transportation, and infrastructure jobs. By partnering with Corps, agencies are offering opportunities for a new generation of young professionals in the communities in which these projects are located.

If you are a Federal, State, or Local Land Manager....

By serving on transportation, trail, and recreation infrastructure projects, Corpsmembers receive relevant workforce training and learn new industry-recognized conservation skills and certifications. Corpsmembers also have opportunities to learn about careers in the transportation and outdoor recreation economies and network with professionals in resource management. Many Corps operate under land management agreements with the Public Land Corps authority, allowing Corpsmembers serving under these agreements to receive a special hiring authority after their term of service. Corps also bring diverse funding sources and grants to a partnership, helping to meet match requirements and expand the work capacity.

Building the Future of Trail and Transportation Professionals

¹ <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/tea21/>

² <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/map21/qandas/qayscc.cfm>

The purpose of this guide is to acquaint state trail programs, transportation agencies, and land managers with the benefits of developing contracts and cooperative agreements with Service and Conservation Corps on trail and transportation projects, encourage the use of Corps in state-funded transportation and trail programs, and promote employing Corpsmembers in trail and transportation careers. Our goal is to build upon Corps success and expand the number of quality trail and transportation projects Corps complete in partnership with state administrators and land managers. By encouraging the use of Corps, we hope to strengthen transportation and recreation career pathways for a younger and diverse workforce.

Accomplishments: The Corps Network – FHWA Partnership

Training and Education

- 200+ meetings, workshops, teleconferences, and training sessions

Support

- More Corps accessing state education grants and safety programs

Resources

- 5+ Comprehensive publications and toolkits
- Development of a Trails and Transportation webpage

Department of Transportation Strategic Goals

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) established strategic goals³ and objectives to reflect the Secretary's priorities for achieving USDOT's mission of ensuring safe and efficient modern transportation systems, improving the quality of life for all American people and communities, and increasing the productivity and competitiveness of American workers and businesses:

USDOT Strategic Goals (2022-2026)

- How these Goals are interpreted through the Case Studies
- **Safety:** Make our transportation system safer for all people. Work toward a future where transportation-related serious injuries and fatalities are eliminated.
 - Corps projects have a primary objective to address user safety on trails and related projects through restorative work; installation of new trail or other active transportation structures; signage; implementing education and safety programming.

³ <https://www.regulations.gov/document/DOT-OST-2021-0140-0002>

- **Economic Strength:** Grow an inclusive and sustainable economy. Invest in our transportation system to provide American workers and businesses reliable and efficient access to good-paying jobs, resources, and markets.
 - Corps projects strengthen trail and related access and connectivity options to adjacent communities; Corps recruit local young adults and offer post-program career pathway options and exploration.

- **Equity:** Reduce inequities. Support and engage people and communities to promote safe, affordable, accessible, and multimodal access to opportunities and services while reducing transportation-related disparities, adverse community impacts, and health effects.
 - Corps projects are intentional in their outreach and recruitment of young adults from underserved communities. Equity considerations are integrated into the planning, development, and implementation of trail and related projects, training, and workforce development plans.

- **Climate and Sustainability:** Tackle the climate crisis by ensuring that transportation plays a central role in the solution. Substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transportation-related pollution and build more resilient and sustainable transportation systems to benefit and protect communities.
 - Corps projects prioritize minimal environmental impacts to corridors through climate-informed techniques and preplanning. Projects address the effects of natural disasters on trail and related systems through restorative work, sustainable construction techniques, and other enhancements to promote resilience and sustainability.

- **Transformation:** Design for the future. Invest in purpose-driven research and innovation to meet the challenge of the present and modernize a transportation system of the future that serves everyone today and, in the decades to come.
 - Corps work with diverse stakeholders to prioritize trail and related infrastructure modernization work. Projects are designed and executed to accommodate and respond to the changing needs of users. Corpsmembers are trained in new industry-recognized trail building and conservation techniques.

Corpsmember Recruitment and Retention Best Practices

The purpose of this guidebook is to highlight Service and Conservation Corps best practices and strategies for Corpsmember recruitment and retention. The case study narratives presented in this document will detail successful methods for engaging with youth and young adults, how Corps engage Corpsmembers in service learning projects that provide rigorous workforce development, mentorship on professional and educational goals, and retention strategies for continued engagement and enrichment. The case studies in this guidebook will explore successful methods for outreaching to diverse Corpsmember populations, engagement with Corpsmembers from underserved communities, post-pandemic lessons and how Corps were able to overcome challenges during that period.

For state agencies and/or land managers, your takeaway will be learning about how Service and Conservation Corps are preparing the next generation of youth and young adults for in-demand transportation, trail, and conservation jobs and careers. The experiences Corpsmembers have on transportation and trail projects – through project partner mentorship, education days, etc. – contributes to success in program retention and enthusiasm for the trail building community. Some of these narratives may provide insight in how to partner with a local Corps and the ways you can support crew programming costs.

For Corps staff and leadership, these case studies highlight some best practices from your Corps counterparts around the country and can offer strategies for your own outreach, recruitment and retention efforts.

Successful Recruitment Methods

Service and Conservation Corps are resourceful and adaptable to changing economies, environments and employment trends in a post-pandemic world. Evolving recruitment practices have allowed many Corps to engage with new populations of young adults from diverse demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Corps who regularly work with young adults from under-resourced communities have adapted strategies and methods that could be transferable to other Corps who engage with different populations of Corpsmembers. While not an exhaustive list, the following are a few successful methods from Corps featured in this guidebook who have recruited locally and nationally during challenging recruitment periods.

Using Corps Staff and Crew Leaders. Oftentimes Corps staff and Crew Leaders were former Corpsmembers themselves who have gone through the experience and are comfortable with Corps culture and community. They can be a great source for positive word of the mouth to their community and other potential Corpsmembers.

In 2022, CLIMB Conservation Corps had one crew leader who was responsible for enrolling 6 new Corpsmembers for their Black Creek trail project at De Soto National Forest. (page 23)

Using Social Media in Creative Ways. It's common knowledge that social media is an effective tool for awareness and reaching youth and young adults for recruitment efforts. However, it may not be enough to just update your Facebook account periodically. Using a variety of social media platforms consistently and regularly with updated photos and multimedia can be a great way for program awareness. You want to tell the story that joining a Corps is not only professionally enriching but can be a fun experience as well.

SEEDS EcoCorps created a recruitment video that is shared on social media to spread awareness to new young adults applicants. (page 20)

Responsive Customer Service. It's a good practice to have Corps staff follow up with prospective Corpsmember applicants within 1 to 2 days. This will help set the tone that your program is responsive and values the potential members' time.

The Wisconsin Conservation Corps implements a quick turnaround time for Corpsmember placement selections, which happens months before the project starts. Staff schedules one-on-one calls with applicants to ensure they are a good fit for the program and discusses expectations. (page 16)

Local and State Social Services. Developing or strengthening partnerships with state and local social services can be an invaluable resource for engaging new populations of young adults who may experience economic barriers. Connecting with a Corps through a trusted social service network can give them an opportunity to serve their community and pursue professional development goals.

For years, Greencorps Chicago has fostered strong local partnerships with local social services and networks, which has allowed the Corps to reach a wide variety of Chicago residents with support from case managers and employment specialists. These connections have helped recruit local residents. (page 12)

Recruitment Support from Project Sponsors. Corpsmember recruitment can be a collaborative effort between Corps programs and project sponsors. Getting buy-in from the project partners on supporting outreach efforts helps build investment in the crew that could end up being future employees.

Wisconsin Conservation Corps works with project partners on outreach and recruitment in a way that makes sense for both parties—such as using partner networks and social media platforms for outreach. The Corps leverages these tools to find qualified and enthusiastic applicants for the crew work. (page 16)

Corpsmember Retention Strategies

Interview for Culture Fit. Some Corpsmember applicants may have immediate needs that are not aligned with the Corps' mission and values for conservation and service. Corps should interview or survey applicants for culture fit and be prepared to invest in members so they can have a transformational experience while serving.

Consider Corpsmember Morale. Being conscious of Corpsmember morale and enrichment can help with program retention and success rates and prevent monotony and burnout. Some Corps have found success incorporating enrichment activities and education days that are relevant and aligned with the crew's service-learning projects. Corps should try and identify local community events, conferences and activities for Corpsmembers to participate in. Land management project partners may be a good source for volunteer activities and training opportunities.

Increasing Corpsmember Compensation. For Corps working with nonrestrictive funding, some have been successful with re-evaluating increases to Corpsmember compensation to a rate that is competitive for their area. Some Corps staff have found success with monitoring and evaluating Corpsmember performances and work outcomes when making determinations on compensation increases.

Providing Soft Skill Lessons. Soft skill lessons and training can be invaluable for a Corpsmember's workforce development journey, helping a Corpsmember become professionally competitive following their term of service. Corps that build in soft skill education days – such as career exploration, financial literacy, customer service, conflict resolution, leadership, etc – into their programming can give Corpsmembers a more well-rounded workforce development experience and better preparation for their next steps.

Eliminating Barriers. Some Corps work with youth and young adults with immediate needs with programming that offers wraparound services and resources that support members on their education, life skills and workforce development goals. In order to support these efforts, Corps may provide resources to help eliminate barriers, which have been proven successful in retention rates. Providing a small stipend for transportation, offering meal and food provisions on crew projects, or providing for uniforms and appropriate work clothing can go a long way.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Every Service and Conservation Corps experiences their own unique challenges with Corpsmember recruitment and engagement. The case studies will also explore the lessons learned and how Corps were able to overcome these challenges.

Recruitment at Colleges and Universities. Recruiting for Corpsmembers at colleges and universities can be a great way to engage with young adults who are already on an educational and professional trajectory that's in alignment with a Corps' mission and values. Working with institutions can also be a great career pipeline that allows students to receive field experience on a seasonal crew and then apply for federal and state jobs afterwards. For Corps working with land management partners, there's an opportunity to engage with the Public Land Corps program, in which eligible students can have access to a hiring authority if they meet certain requirements. It's worth noting that there may be additional administrative time and resources needed for these partnerships. Some Corps have found that college career fairs and events are great spaces for recruitment, but require a lot more administrative time and money. A Corps' orientation period and crew field schedules may not be in alignment with a student's semester schedule. Additionally, some schools only allow job announcements on Handshake⁴, a job portal that is not always effective for reaching your intended audience.

Follow-ups and Customer Service. As stated above in 'Successful Recruitment Strategies', customer service and communication can be a major factor in successfully recruiting interested applicants for a Corps program. A challenge that many Corps face is small staff capacity. It's not uncommon for field staff, who are managing crews and project logistics, to also be responsible for recruitment and outreach. This can affect the turnaround time for Corps staff in recruitment and following up with applicants. Some Corps also struggle to find capacity supporting grants and funding, as most grants require direct service rather than administrative costs. However, if a

⁴ Handshake is an online recruiting platform for higher education students and alumni that partners with higher education institutes and potential employers to streamline and simplify the recruitment process.
<https://joinhandshake.com/>

Corps is able to develop a recruitment and outreach staff person, even if it's seasonal, this can significantly help with recruitment of new applicants. Alternatively, a Corps can train their current staff on better communication strategies and time management so they can effectively follow up with applicants in a timely fashion.

Summary of FHWA Federal-Aid Case Studies

The case studies in this section will explore six Service and Conservation Corps programs that have served on recreational trail and trail-adjacent projects across geographically diverse locations. Case studies will discuss how Corps outreach, recruit, and engage with Corpsmembers from diverse backgrounds, demographics, and/or come from underserved communities. Many Corpsmembers were outreached and recruited with intention from local environmental justice communities. This is defined as a neighborhood or community composed predominantly with people of color, a large percentage of the population living below the poverty line, and/or those that live with the burden of environmental hazards as a result of historic and systemic injustices. Case studies will explore how Corps implement methods for engaging youth from these populations while serving as transformational experiences through program support systems, wrap-around services, and offering opportunities to pursue education and professional development goals.

The following case studies will offer the reader strategies, solutions, or direction for what can be accomplished with a Corps grantee or subcontractor through state trail or transportation program support. Case studies include background and history of the partnership, funding and contracting strategies, descriptions of the project work, lessons learned, outcomes, and effective practices. All project examples intentionally align with the permissible uses of state funds — such as construction of new trails, maintenance, trailside facilities, and educational safety programming.

While some projects are ongoing, the majority of the work occurred between 2022 - 2023, with some foundational work and procurements initiating in 2021. The Corps featured served as either direct recipients or subrecipients on these program grants and leveraged federal awards, private funding, AmeriCorps, or other fundraising sources. Case studies will also highlight what Corps use for in-kind partner match contributions—such as managing community and volunteer groups, providing supplies and equipment, supporting crew labor, and travel.

For State transportation or trail agency and/or land managers, your takeaway will be learning new strategies and best practices for how to partner and develop projects with a Conservation Corps, support the implementation of sustainable youth crews and programs, leverage your capacity building through the Corps' facilitation of volunteer and community groups, and read examples of technical and advanced trail building projects completed by experienced crews.

For Corps staff and leadership, these case studies highlight some best practices from your Corps counterparts around the country and can offer strategies for your own

funding and development efforts. Case studies demonstrate how the various levels of funding and resources flow into a trail project, which can offer direction for how to approach new partners and build relationships. With workforce development being essential to the Corps model, each case study will highlight the various ways Corpsmembers are impacted during their time providing direct service to the project. Civic engagement, industry-recognized skills and certifications, and career pathways following their service are some of the many opportunities Corpsmembers receive while serving.

Summary of Case Studies

Case Study Summary Table

- **Trail Construction, Maintenance and Restoration**
 - Chicago Greencorps; Wisconsin Conservation Corps; SEEDS EcoCorps; Conservation Corps of the Forgotten and Emerald Coast; Appalachian Conservation Corps
- **Trail Structures and Facilities**
 - SEEDS EcoCorps; Conservation Corps of the Forgotten and Emerald Coast
- **Vegetation Management, Invasive Control and Fire Fuels**
 - Chicago Greencorps; Wisconsin Conservation Corps; SEEDS EcoCorps; CLIMB Conservation Corps
- **Case Study**
 - **Great Lakes**
 - Chicago Greencorps (Equity; Economic Strength; Climate and Sustainability) - pg 12
 - Wisconsin Conservation Corps (Safety; Climate and Sustainability) - pg 16
 - SEEDS EcoCorps (Equity; Climate and Sustainability; Transformation) - pg 20
 - **Gulf Coast**
 - CLIMB Conservation Corps (Equity; Economic Strength) - pg 23
 - Conservation Corps of the Forgotten and Emerald Coast (Equity; Economic Strength; Climate and Sustainability) - pg 27
 - **West Virginia**
 - Appalachian Conservation Corps (Safety; Transformation) - pg 32

Burnham Wildlife Corridor

Corpsmembers maintain and protect local park trails for public use

Greencorps Chicago

Project Partners and Sponsors

Chicago Department of Transportation

Chicago Park District

Burnham Wildlife Corridor

WRD Environmental

FHWA STRATEGIC GOALS:

Equity; Economic Strength; Climate and Sustainability

Background and Overview - The Burnham Wildlife Corridor

The Burnham Wildlife Corridor (Burnham), administered by the Chicago Park District (CPD), is a 100-acre section of urban wilderness that runs along both sides of South Lake Shore Drive. Popular with locals and visitors, the corridor can be accessed through Lakefront Trail and offers a variety of ecosystems and public green spaces with trails, diverse habitats, and nesting grounds for migratory birds. For years, the partnership with the Greencorps Chicago (GC) has provided seasonal young adult crews to work on trail maintenance and habitat restoration. Crews are deployed to work on priority maintenance projects that address storm damage clearing, visitor and hiker access to the trail system, and prescribe fire preparation. The partnership has been a great opportunity for the Chicago Park District to engage with a trained cohort of local young adults eager to apply their new conservation industry skills while providing a valuable public service to one of Chicago's most popular parks.

Project Work - Lakefront Trail Maintenance

For years, Greencorps Chicago (GC) crews are deployed seasonally to service the trails and green spaces throughout Burnham that involve maintenance, vegetation, and prescribed fire preparation work. Work took place primarily along the popular Lakefront Trail where from April - May of 2022 and 2023, crews cleared fallen trees and overgrown brush caused by severe storms, applied their training in plant identification and herbicide application to remove invasive species, resurfaced, and mulched the trails. Additionally, Greencorps crews supported CPD staff with prescription fire preparation work through removing vegetation and cutting burn breaks on trail sections and their adjacent corridors. When park staff initiate prescribed fires, the burn breaks help prevent the spread of fire to unintended places. The vegetation the crew remove mitigate the prescribed fires from burning uncontrollably.

Over the past two years, 10 different GC crews are placed on a cyclical schedule to provide these services for Burnham. Crews are typically made up of local adults over the age of 18, and include five Corpsmembers and one crew supervisor who leads the crew with industry experience. The trail maintenance and prescribed fire work has become a regular spring project that the Corpsmembers look forward to.

The partnership between the Chicago Park District and Greencorps Chicago started over 12 years ago through a direct agreement that is renewed annually. Through this collaboration, CPD provides project opportunities for a newly trained workforce and space for hands-on field experience that gets critical maintenance and conservation work done. Corpsmembers receive rigorous training that protects the trail corridor and provides safe recreation access to locals and visitors. The partnership has created a successful workforce pipeline for individuals who exit the Greencorps program and want to pursue careers with the Chicago Park District. Greencorps post-program placement rate averages around 72 percent of Corpsmembers who graduate in good standing and over 50 percent work in green industries. Many Corpsmembers have been hired by the Chicago Park District, local conservation companies, government agencies, and private contractors with trail and conservation jobs.

4.3 miles of trail maintained

15 acres of invasive species controlled along the trail system

3 tons of herbaceous invasive species removed

Funding Sources and In-kind Contributions

Greencorps Chicago is awarded \$150,000 annually through a cooperative agreement with the Chicago Park District, of which \$30,000 - \$45,000 is set aside for Burnham Wildlife Corridor projects. Although this agreement does not have a partner match requirement, Greencorps Chicago provides crews of Corpsmembers who receive additional training funded by the City of Chicago and the Cook County Forest Preserves, field supplies, equipment, tools, and program administration.

Corpsmember Recruitment and Retention - Successful Methods and Challenges

For decades, Greencorps has fostered strong local partnerships and collaborations with social services throughout Chicago. Through these networks, the Corps can reach a wide variety of Chicago residents, case managers, and employment specialists that help recruit and employ local residents—many of whom experience economic barriers and are from environmental justice communities. Greencorps works with new applicants on navigating the enrollment process and training them for the upcoming field season. Greencorps even has a few open house events every February to help individuals get acclimated to the Corps program experience.

Being conscious of Corpsmember morale and enrichment while serving in the program helps with program retention and success rates. Greencorps incorporates enrichment activities and education days that are relevant and aligned with the crew's service-learning projects by identifying community events, conferences and local activities for Corpsmembers to participate in. GC will also schedule a variety of service projects to prevent monotony and burnout. Throughout the field season and to show appreciation, the Corps will have appreciation days that include celebrations of achievements and prizes for members that are in good standing.

Similar to other industries, Greencorps experienced post-pandemic challenges with Corpsmember outreach and recruitment. In the years prior to the pandemic, the Chicagoland area had record low unemployment rates. During and after the pandemic, many communities

and families were reassessing priorities, careers, and employment options that can address immediate needs. During this time, GC tackled a decline in Corpsmember applications and enrollment but found that increasing the hourly wage made a big difference. GC does not rely on AmeriCorps funding, which can be restrictive with how much can be applied to Corpsmember compensation. With funding flexibility, GC launched a new performance-based system in 2023 where Corpsmembers can earn a higher hourly wage if they complete certain assessments while serving on community projects. Corps staff works with individuals, monitor, and evaluate performances to make determinations on compensation increases based on a Corpsmember's work outcomes and other metrics.

Corpsmember Engagement - Training and Workforce Development

Greencorps trains their Corpsmembers in hard and soft skills, along with industry-recognized certifications in preparation for their trail and conservation projects at Burnham. Before being deployed on the project, Corpsmembers receive trail maintenance training that includes the safe management and use of trail tools, management of power equipment—such as wood chippers and brush cutters, and chainsaw training based on the US Forest Service model⁵. As many of their trail projects involve vegetation management through herbicide application, Corpsmembers will receive training on the safe management and use of herbicide. Greencorps staff also work with individuals to help them pass the Illinois state pesticide exam and receive the license. Additional training includes horticulture classes, plant identification, training on safe use of tools and equipment, Wildland Fire, First aid and CPR⁶, OSHA-10⁷, and HAZWOPER-40⁸.

About the Corps

Greencorps Chicago is the City of Chicago's green-industry employment program with on-the-job training for individuals with barriers to employment based at the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT). Greencorps Chicago's mission is to empower residents from Chicago's underserved neighborhoods to create change in their lives and communities through training, service, and career opportunities in environmental fields. Greencorps Chicago promotes environmental stewardship and improves the quality of life in Chicago by establishing, maintaining, and restoring natural and public spaces that are safe, healthy, and sustainable through hands-on involvement with program participants. The outcome is healthier, safer, and more engaged communities and individuals who are prepared for employment through practical field experience and technical training in a variety of environmentally related jobs. Greencorps Chicago is a public/private partnership between CDOT and WRD Environmental.

Connecting with Greencorps Chicago

For more information on partnerships, project development, contracting, and partnership, reach out directly to the Greencorps Chicago Program Director:

⁵ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/trails/trail-management-tools/national-saw-program>

⁶ Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) training

⁷ OSHA 10-hour training teaches basic safety and health information to entry-level workers in construction and general industry.

⁸ HAZWOPER training teaches clean-up and emergency response workers how to operate safely during various scenarios involving hazardous materials.

greencorpschicago.org/contact
312-746-9777

Chequamegon Area Mountain Bike Association Trail System

Corpsmembers help restore a popular mountain bike trail system in Northern Wisconsin

Wisconsin Conservation Corps

Project Partners and Sponsors

Chequamegon Area Mountain Bike Association

Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest

Forest Service - Secure Rural Schools Program

FHWA STRATEGIC GOALS:

Safety; Climate and Sustainability

Background and Overview - Northern Wisconsin Mountain Bike Trails

The Chequamegon Area Mountain Bike Association (CAMBA) is a nonprofit organization that has developed and managed a regional mountain bike trail system throughout northern Wisconsin. Many of CAMBA's 130+ hiking and winter trails are in and around the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (Chequamegon-Nicolet) and offer mountain bikers and recreation users connections to a system of 200+ miles of routes and connections to local towns and communities. The CAMBA trail system is considered very popular among regular users and needs consistent maintenance and restoration to keep up with the trail's high use. For years, CAMBA has maintained these trails with the support of local volunteer groups, seasonal staff, and contractors. Many of these trails were built decades ago where the advanced sustainable techniques we use today were not implemented. CAMBA's more remote trail locations have severe erosion and drainage issues, making these trails unsafe and inaccessible for mountain bikers. The availability of volunteers and experienced trail workers has decreased over the years. Due to the remoteness of these trails, volunteer groups oftentimes do not have the availability or experience to hike into project sites to perform the work. CAMBA has also struggled to find enough funding to support experienced contractors to complete their trail restoration needs.

The Wisconsin Conservation Corps (WCC) has had a regional presence for over 10 years, engaging with youth and young adults on trail and conservation projects throughout Wisconsin. CAMBA contracted WCC for their services to address the backcountry trail sections that need drainage, erosion, and restoration work. WCC staff performed site visits to meet with CAMBA partners, walk the trails, and develop an action plan. A multicrew contract was negotiated in Fall 2021 that would kickoff the first phase of work in Summer 2022. An updated contract is now in place for 2023 field services. Several different WCC crews have completed trail restoration projects with CAMBA during the 2022 - 2023 seasons. To date, a total of 25 WCC participants have been assigned to the CAMBA partnership.

Project Work - Makwa Trail and Seeley Pass Trails

During the summer 2022, WCC provided a six person crew to assist CAMBA with mountain bike trail maintenance along routes that lie within or adjacent to the Chequamegon-Nicolet. For six weeks, the crew performed tread rehabilitation, maintenance, erosion control and drainage through outer edge trail berm removal⁹, brush cutting and mowing of the trail corridor. Returning for Summer 2023, WCC performed additional trail maintenance work under the guidance and direction of CAMBA staff. For 10-weeks, a five person crew worked on the Makwa Trail, Seeley Pass and trails within The Namakagon Cluster. These trails were part of the CAMBA mountain bike system and were impacted by 20+ years of hand-built, unsustainable treads that had severe deferred maintenance needs. Work included tread rehabilitation, erosion control and drainage, brush cutting, and mowing.

WCC requires that their project partners be onsite for the project kickoff, meet with the crewmembers, discuss the history of the land, and share outcomes and expectations—all of which provides meaning and connection for the crew and their work. WCC staff will also be on site in the first few days of the project to provide oversight. Staff will monitor for safe use of tools and equipment and quality control checks. Staff site visits are scheduled biweekly, however if a project involves more technical aspects, WCC staff may remain at the project site for longer periods to provide more in-depth oversight of the work. Crew Leaders provide their own mentorship and oversight of the Corpsmembers by checking-in periodically to review progress and wellness.

Funding Sources and In-kind Contributions

CAMBA awarded WCC \$96,000 over two years through various funding sources to support project work on trail segments that run through the Chequamegon-Nicolet. Although the CAMBA agreement did not have a partner match requirement, WCC did provide a number of in-kind contributions toward the agreement. These included WCC personnel and staff administration towards preaward contracting and project development, staff site visits and consultant, trucks and vehicles, tools and supplies, crew food provisions for backcountry work, and insurance and liability. CAMBA raised funding through their mountain biking events and provided planning and logistical support, specialized project and trail building materials, project oversight, and nearby housing for the crew. In 2023, CAMBA received funding for 6 weeks of their contract with WCC through the Secure Rural Schools Program that was administered by the US Forest Service's Resource Advisory Council (RAC). Looking forward, CAMBA has secured funding through a grant under the Recreational Trails Program, federal funds administered by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. This future funding is expected to cover nearly three-quarters of 2024 WCC crew expenses.

Corpsmember Recruitment and Retention - Successful Methods and Challenges

WCC launches their recruitment period during the first quarter of every year to ensure they have Corpsmember placements ready for the summer and fall field seasons. Corpsmember applicants are reviewed for experience, culture fit, and commitment to the Corps' mission. WCC

⁹ A berm is the mound of soil that develops on the outside of the trail tread. Berms disrupt tread out-slope and prevent water from leaving the tread to the down-slope. https://www.pcta.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Terminology_v0311.pdf

will often post job announcements at colleges, universities and high schools throughout Wisconsin and perform some public interfacing at job and career fairs. WCC posts to various national job boards—up to 10 different boards per year, using Handshake and other social media platforms. Word of mouth from Corps alumni and staff has been a successful tool for spreading positive feedback about the Corps' many opportunities. When applicants are being reviewed, WCC schedules one-on-one informational calls with staff and applicants to ensure they are a good fit for the program and discuss expectations. In addition to resumes, Corpsmembers are required to submit a questionnaire that will be reviewed during these one-on-ones. WCC ensures there is a quick turnaround time for placement selections, which happens months before the project starts.

WCC has learned that recruitment is a shared interest. It's important that a Corps work with their project partners on outreach and recruitment in a way that makes sense for both parties. If the project partner has any social media platforms or connections, the Corps can leverage those to find qualified and enthusiastic applicants for the crew work. Getting buy-in from the project partners on supporting outreach efforts helps build investment in the crew that could end up being future employees. When it comes to identifying quality applicants, WCC will help reduce the barriers for applying for the program. Staff work with Corpsmembers individually, learn more about them and what their culture fit is, which has been helpful with retention rates and finding quality applicants that are enthusiastic about the program and its mission. Project work assignments and locations are shared in advance with the crews so that they can best prepare for field season expectations.

Corpsmember Engagement - Training and Workforce Development

Every season, WCC uses a local girl scout camp in southwestern Wisconsin for the new Corpsmember and leader orientation. New Crew Leaders will arrive a few weeks early to receive rigorous training and lessons needed to lead their crews and provide proper oversight. Their training involves orientation on AmeriCorps policy, HR and administration, overviews of safe use of tools and equipment, two days of wilderness first aid and adult CPR training, and Wisconsin herbicide, and pesticide training for invasive species work. Crew Leaders also receive a one day training on how to operate large vehicles and trailers and a three day safety training for chainsaw use with a local instructor. New crewmember applicants will arrive at the camp later to receive similar training, except for chainsaw, herbicide, and vehicles. Being able to train in the same camp together allows for the Crew Leaders and Corpsmembers to build strong relationships and trust with one another before they are deployed throughout Wisconsin and the Midwest for their field season.

WCC experiences a 10-15 percent rate of Corpsmembers who complete a field season and return to engage in the following season as alumni. Oftentimes, Corpsmember alumni will reapply and train to be Crew Leaders or even apply to be seasonal WCC staff. Corpsmembers who successfully complete the program have found pathways for jobs and careers in the local and regional industries—such as seasonal employees with land management agencies, local trail crews, and conservations jobs.

About the Corps

The WisCorps mission is to develop leadership, self-confidence, and a strong work ethic in youth and young adults through the active stewardship of Wisconsin's communities and natural resources. WisCorps, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) Conservation Corps headquartered in La Crosse, Wisconsin that engages youth and young adults in two areas: conservation projects and nature education. WisCorps, Inc. houses two separate divisions: The Nature Place and Wisconsin Conservation Corps.

Connecting with the Wisconsin Conservation Corps

For more information on partnerships, project development, contracting, and partnership, reach out to the WCC Director:

Eric Robertson

eric.robertson@wiscorps.org

608-304-9860

North Country Trail

Crews complete multimodal restoration work on a national scenic trail

SEEDS EcoCorps

Project Partners and Sponsors

National Park Foundation

North Country Trail Association

Grand Traverse Land Conservancy

Traverse Area Regional Trails

Huron-Manistee National Forest

Wilderness State Park

FHWA STRATEGIC GOALS

Equity; Climate and Sustainability; Transformation

Background and Overview - Huron-Manistee National Forest

The Michigan section of the North Country Trail (NCT) spans for over 1,000 miles and is maintained and administered by local volunteer groups, associations, state and federal agencies. Recreation users populate the trail year-round for hiking, biking and winter activities. The Michigan section running through Manistee County is part of the county's trail system and helps connect Northern Michigan communities and long-distance users to scenic public lands, wilderness spaces, national forests and outdoor recreation. Over the years, popular sections of the trail exhibited compounded erosion damage from wildland fire, storms, and high foot traffic. Huron-Manistee National Forest (Huron-Manistee) and the Wilderness State Park host sections of the North Country Trail that run through their lands and needed significant maintenance, restoration, trail structure installation work to make the tread more accessible and sustainable for multimodal users and repair compounded natural disaster damage.

SEEDS EcoCorps (SEEDS), based in Northwestern Michigan, is a locally based service and conservation Corps that performs trail and conservation projects throughout the state and region. Having worked on previous projects along other NCT sections, land management staff from the North Country Trail Association, NCTA volunteer chapters, and National Forest were aware of the Corps' work with local partners and wanted to contract a youth Corps that can help leverage volunteer and staff capacity. The National Park Foundation, in partnership with Huron-Manistee, awarded the first round of funding to support trail rerouting efforts that will help make popular sections more sustainable and repair multimodal hiking and biking sections in southern portions of the Forest district. Subsequent funding from private foundations and the National Park Foundation directly supported additional trailwork along the NCT in multiple locations.

Project Work - The North Country Trail

Since 2019, SEEDS has deployed seasonal conservation crews, averaging five individuals per crew, to NCT sections that run through both state and federal lands. Huron-Manistee and Wilderness State Park hosted the rerouting and maintenance work in 2022 and other ongoing projects. In an effort to support the post-storm and wildland fire restoration, the first phase of the work addressed erosion mitigation and maintenance of multimodal trail corridors within Huron-Manistee. Prior to serving on these projects, each Corpsmember received orientation on what is needed to support multimodal trails and how to make trails accessible for different users and recreation activities through collaborations with local land conservancies and trail organizations. The post-storm work included brush clearing, vegetation management, and removing fall trees from the trail corridor. Erosion maintenance was applied and drainage and water bar systems were installed to make the trail more sustainable for future use. In June 2023, crews helped Wilderness State Park staff with a boardwalk installation project along the park's shoreline. Crews brought in project materials and assisted with the puncheon and new boardwalk that was constructed and installed over marshy wetland areas in the park. This will help protect native plant species and the sensitive ecosystem along the trail corridor. Similar work was implemented in earlier years through wetland systems in the West Michigan section of the trail. Extensive fire site trail work was conducted in the Upper Peninsula in 2020.

Funding Sources and In-kind Contributions

SEEDS was the direct recipient of a \$50,000 grant from the National Park Foundation and provided a 25 percent partner match contribution of in-kind and cash match sources. \$15,000 of the cash match came from private partner donations and the rest from in-kind values of Corpsmember training, tools and equipment, field supplies, and transportation. Additional support came from the Grand Traverse Land Conservancy, TART trails, and numerous professionals who provided the Corpsmember and Corps staff training.

Corpsmember Recruitment and Retention - Successful Methods and Challenges

For years, SEEDS has been embedded in their local community and is well known throughout Northwestern Michigan. Community members, parents and teachers who are aware of SEEDS' programming provide positive word of mouth and help spread awareness about the Corps' crew opportunities. As a result, many of the Corps' new member applicants come from the Traverse City area and local communities. In 2023, SEEDS staff implemented mostly in-person recruitment and outreach efforts - a change from the pandemic years where most of their outreach was done virtually. Corps staff will still post to job boards, attend career fairs. Recently, SEEDS created a recruitment video that is shared on social media to spread awareness and new young adult applicants. There has been limited efforts to reach out to universities and colleges due to a more focused effort in connecting with youth and Young adults with immediate needs, in need of education and professional development, and who come from underserved communities. SEEDS has found success with providing their Corpsmembers per hour wages and doesn't currently manage AmeriCorps program funding. This gives the Corps more flexibility with compensation management. During the pandemic years, SEEDS was able to increase Corpsmember wages to incentivize more applicants during a difficult period and as a result had fewer issues with recruitment in recent years.

Corpsmember Engagement - Training and Workforce Development

Before being deployed to the trail projects, Corpsmembers participate in an annual training and orientation session that SEEDS hosts annually. Approximately 25 Corpsmembers are recruited annually, participate in the collective training, and are then assigned to various crews that are deployed throughout Michigan and the northwestern lower peninsula region. Depending on what the project needs are, summer day crews are used, others are developed in a hitch or spike camp model¹⁰.

SEEDS provides all Corpsmembers hard and soft skill training and orientation prior to being deployed to their project sites. SEEDS may work with land management partners on training opportunities for members. For example, the National Park Service will provide webinars and lessons on how to apply for federal positions through the public land corps hiring authority. SEEDS staff will work with individuals on their education and professional development goals, mentorship on how to build a resume, and developing customer service and public engagement communication skills. Conservation and trail building training is provided and varies depending on the project and partner needs. Corpsmembers and Crew Leaders all receive training in green infrastructure, farming and agriculture, and skills in how to install and maintain ecologically regenerative landscapes.

About the Corps

SEEDS Ecology and Education Centers is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization established in 1999 to implement local solutions to global issues at the intersection of ecology, education, and design. Through its staff, volunteers, and community partners, SEEDS makes a positive direct impact on hundreds of people each day. SEEDS work focuses on place-based activities that regenerate habitat, prevent carbon emissions, develop talent pipelines for green industries, and invest in the next generations. SEEDS has proudly served Michigan as a green solutions incubator and employer since 1999. Crew Leaders and members get first-hand experience in careers related to restoration of public and private lands, installing and maintaining ecologically regenerative landscapes, farming, and green infrastructure.

Connecting with SEEDS EcoCorps

For more information on partnerships, project development, contracting, and partnership, reach out directly to the Program Director:

231-947-0312

jennifer@ecoseeds.org

hello@ecoseeds.org

¹⁰ A spike or hitch is a style of camp accommodations that allows a crew to set up temporary housing near the project and remain onsite for a scheduled period of time. Typically, a spike camp can range from 4-10 days or longer, depending on project location and other logistics.

Black Creek Trail

Corpsmembers from Mississippi's gulf coast serve on a wilderness protected trail

CLIMB Conservation Corps

Project Partners and Sponsors

Climb Community Development Corporation

US Forest Service

De Soto National Forest

GulfCorps

RESTORE Council

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

The Nature Conservancy

The Corps Network

Student Conservation Association

Harrison County Emergency Management Administration

The Ember Alliance

FHWA STRATEGIC GOALS

Equity; Economic Strength

Background and Overview - De Soto National Forest and the Black Creek Wilderness

Located in the Gulf region of southern Mississippi, De Soto National Forest offers recreational users diverse ecosystems to explore—from dry longleaf pine ridges to bald cypress swamps. Considered one of Mississippi's longest trails, the Black Creek Trail runs for 39 miles along the Black Creek River, contains over 100 bridges and boardwalks, and provides access to De Soto's many secluded hiking and biking trails. About 10 miles of the trail runs through the Black Creek Wilderness, one of two wilderness protected areas within Mississippi. The wilderness section of the Black Creek Trail was closed off to users due to a severe amount of overgrown brush and vegetation, making the trail inaccessible for nonmotorized users. In summer 2022, DeSoto partnered with the Climb Community Development Corporation (CLIMB CDC), a local young adult workforce development program in Gulfport, Mississippi, to contract their Climb Conservation Corps (CCC) program to reopen the trail section. Crews were deployed to the 10-mile stretch of trail to remove overgrown brush and vegetation using nonmotorized transportation and hand tools to complete the work.

Project Work - The Black Creek Trail

The Climb Conservation Corps (CCC) has partnered for years with De Soto and the US Forest Service on trail and conservation projects throughout the Mississippi gulf region. In recent years, De Soto was selected as a GulfCorps program land management partner that would receive

services from participating, locally based Corps to complete backlogged maintenance projects while building workforce development skills for young adults. Launched in 2017, GulfCorps is an initiative funded by a RESTORE Council grant and administered by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and The Nature Conservancy. Through this initiative, local young adults are engaged in projects to protect and restore coastal areas in the five states bordering the Gulf of Mexico. The Black Creek Trail was selected for CCC crews to service and was considered a deferred maintenance project for De Soto staff who needed the additional capacity to address the unique needs of wilderness vegetation management.

Between October and November 2022, CCC crews of 15 Corpsmembers and four Crew Leaders were deployed each day to the 10-mile wilderness stretch of the Black Creek Trail. Corpsmembers were broken up into two groups that started their work on opposite ends of the 10-mile section. The work included daily brush and vegetation clearing of the entire trail corridor. Due to the trail section being in a wilderness protected area, crews hiked in each day and used nonmotorized hand tools and supplies to complete the work. A variety of standard brushing tools were used – such as axes, loppers, and machetes – to remove a mix of invasive species and native plants. Corpsmembers were also given digital maps of the trail and De Soto to help them navigate to the project location each day.

By the end of November 2022, over 2,000 hours of Corpsmember labor was expended over one month and the wilderness section of the Black Creek Trail was reopened and accessible again for recreation users. In total, the CCC crews completed 12-miles of trail vegetation management, with two additional miles being on nonwilderness sections. Although CCC crews worked independently, once per week, a CCC operations manager would hike into the project site and visit with the crew, work alongside them, and spend the day providing oversight and monitoring.

Funding Sources and In-kind Contributions

De Soto National Forest (De Soto) is an approved, participating land management partner in the GulfCorps program. Participating service and conservation Corps programs are contracted to service projects that help protect and restore gulf coastal areas¹¹. GulfCorps serves as a pass-through entity for RESTORE Council funding, administered by NOAA and The Nature Conservancy. As such, De Soto receives free trail maintenance services performed by CLIMB's conservation corps. The in-kind value for the crew's labor and service work is approximately \$25,000. The CCC provides the Corpsmembers labor and manages the crews, provides tools, supplies, personal protective equipment, training, food provisions, and oversight and management of the crews.

Corpsmember Recruitment and Retention - Successful Methods and Challenges

The CCC completes their outreach and recruitment efforts months in advance in order to properly prepare and train their Corpsmembers for an upcoming project. The CCC has found success with Corpsmember alumni, who have previously served a service term, returning to

¹¹ <https://corpsnetwork.org/programs-initiatives/gulf-coast/>

serve again and positive word of mouth from staff and alumni. CCC staff and actively serving Crew Leaders will oftentimes recommend a Corps experience with community members and family and encourage enrollment. In 2022, one crew leader was responsible for enrolling six new Corpsmembers for the Black Creek trail project alone. The CCC will also post job announcements for Corpsmember placements on local job boards and online recruitment tools, such as Indeed¹². The goal for the CCC is to make a conscious effort to engage with local opportunity youth, which is defined as youth and young adults that have been disconnected, out of work, and without a college degree. Approximately 75 percent of the CCC's Corpsmembers are considered opportunity youth and come from underserved, environmental justice communities from the Mississippi gulf coast.

Corpsmember Engagement - Training and Workforce Development

The CCC provides their Corpsmembers a variety of hard and soft skill training and certifications to help support their service learning projects and workforce development goals. In partnership with the Harrison County Emergency Management Administration, the CCC offers community emergency response team (CERT) training that educates about disaster preparedness and local hazards¹³. GulfCorps contracts with the Ember Alliance, which provides professional prescribed fire and wildland fire training. All Corpsmembers receive S2-12 chainsaw certification in operations and safe use. All training and orientations are for one week, in-person classroom lessons and at least 40 hours of online virtual training.

The CCC also provides an additional one week of GulfCorps program orientation, which includes a professional development curriculum, a diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice workshop¹⁴, and other hard and soft skills. Since 2014, The Corps Network has been an established partner of GulfCorps and has worked to expand and improve Corps programming and to support Corpsmembers' professional growth. Each CCC Corpsmember receives professional and workforce development training using the IMPACT curriculum¹⁵ that was created by The Corps Network. This includes professional development skill education, career exploration and workforce development strategies that ensure the Corpsmembers are properly prepared for their next steps in career and job placement.

¹² Indeed is an American worldwide employment website for job listings, oftentimes used by Corps for new Corpsmember recruitment and outreach to fill field crew positions.

¹³ Administered by FEMA, the CERT program offers a consistent, nationwide approach to volunteer training and organization that professional responders can rely on during disaster situations, allowing them to focus on more complex tasks. <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/individuals-communities/preparedness-activities-webinars/community-emergency-response-team>

¹⁴ <https://corpsnetwork.org/our-impact/diversity-equity-inclusion-and-justice-deij/>

¹⁵ The IMPACT curriculum addresses six different areas that lead to a successful professional development program - Individual Corps members Services, Management Systems, Pathways to Post Program Placement, Alumni Services, Connections to Employers, and Training for Members and Staff. The curriculum is an individually focused, member-driven, staff-managed approach that is integrated throughout the term of service with the main purpose being preparation to secure and maintain employment. Major components of the IMPACT model include skills and resources for members to access career pathways after completing their term, such as resume writing, mock interviews, time and stress management and goal setting and achievement.

About the Corps

The CLIMB Conservation Corps (CCC) is a conservation workforce that engages motivated young adults, ages 18 and up, to complete challenging and impactful environmental and service projects throughout Mississippi. Projects may include trail construction and maintenance, habitat improvement, hazardous fuels reduction, revegetation, invasive species treatment, and local environmental service projects.

Located in Gulfport, Mississippi, the CCC is part of the Climb Community Development Corporation (Climb CDC), which engages with locally recruited young adults to help them gain valuable work skills through on-the-job training or to get a second chance at their education goals. Climb CDC has supported program participants on their individual development goals and equipping youth with nationally recognized certifications. These certifications give them the necessary skills for gainful employment earning a livable wage or advance to higher education.

Connecting with Climb Community Development Corporation

For more information on partnerships, project development, fee-for-service contracting, and partnership, connect with the CLIMB Conservation Corps, Chief Conservation Officer:

rwalthall@climbcdc.org

228-864-6677 ext 103

Conservation Corps of the Forgotten and Emerald Coasts

Local Young Adults from the Florida Panhandle Discover New Career Pathways through their Service Work

Conservation Corps of the Forgotten and Emerald Coasts

Project Partners and Sponsors

Franklin's Promise Coalition

Florida Trail Association

U.S. Forest Service

Apalachicola National Forest

Blackwater River State Forest

Duke Energy Foundation

GulfCorps

RESTORE Council

NOAA

The Nature Conservancy

The Corps Network

Student Conservation Association

FHWA STRATEGIC GOALS

Equity; Economic Strength; Climate and Sustainability

Background and Overview - The Florida National Scenic Trail

The Florida National Scenic Trail is a long-distance hiking trail that runs throughout Florida—from the southern end at Big Cypress National Preserve to the western end of the Florida Panhandle. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) administers the trail in order to help preserve its scenic, historic, and cultural characteristics. The Florida Trail Association (FTA) often collaborates with USFS on the maintenance and restoration efforts, typically working with volunteer groups and local partners. Overtime, sections of the trail have become backlogged maintenance projects due to lack of trail staff capacity and compounded environmental factors. Throughout its 1500+ mile trail system, many bridges, boardwalks, and trail corridors are deteriorating faster than staff and volunteer groups can address them. To get popular trail sections safe and accessible for peak hiking season, the FTA wanted to leverage the labor and expertise of a locally based Corps to address their backlogged maintenance issues.

Located in Apalachicola, Florida, Franklin's Promise Coalition (Coalition) is a youth development program that provides job training, academic programming, and hands-on conservation experience for local young adults. The Coalition manages several Service and Conservation Corps programs that have mission-driven goals of conserving, protecting and improving the Gulf Coast environment and adjacent communities. One of these programs, Conservation Corps of

the Forgotten and Emerald Coast (CCFEC), trains local young adults from underserved environmental justice communities and engages them on trail and conservation crews throughout the Florida Panhandle. The USFS, through a collaborative partnership with the FTA, contracted Franklin's Promise to use CCFEC crews on several Florida National Scenic Trail maintenance and safety projects. Through this collaborative effort and partnership, many local young adults have discovered opportunities to serve their community, receive industry-recognized trail skills, and transform their lives through service-learning projects.

Project Work - Apalachicola, Monkey Creek Bridge, and Blackwater River

The first of three backlogged maintenance projects started in September 2021 within the Apalachicola National forest. A CCFEC crew of four Corpsmembers reconstructed and installed a wooden observation platform that allows guests access to a resting area with scenic views of the Leon Sinks geological area. The original viewing platform was slowly deteriorating due to environmental factors and lack of staff capacity to address the necessary restoration and maintenance work. Eventually the National Forest closed off the platform to visitors until the restoration work was completed. When the project wrapped up in March 2022, Apalachicola was able to reopen the observation deck to the general public and trail users.

Following this success, the USFS and the FTA wanted to continue their partnership with the Coalition by contracting a second CCFEC crew to complete work along trail sections that run through Apalachicola and the Blackwater River State Forest. Starting in July 2021 and completing in June 2022, the second CCFEC crew was deployed to work on Monkey Creek Bridge. For years, trail users would access the bridge from the Monkey Creek trailhead in order to cross the Sopchoppy River, however, the bridge was deteriorating and becoming a major safety concern. The CCFEC crew helped restore the bridge through resurfacing, repainting, replacing the rotting timber, and raising the bridge to accommodate for the rising Sopchoppy River water. There were many different repair projects happening on the bridge that Summer, with different partners involved in the restoration efforts. The FTA was able to leverage volunteer groups, local partners and the CCFEC's contributions in getting the Monkey Creek Bridge completed in time for the upcoming hiking season.

In Summer 2023, USFS contracted Franklin's Promise to deploy a third CCFEC crew to serve on a section of the Florida National Scenic Trail that runs within Blackwater River State Forest. Kicking off in July 2023, the new CCFEC crew built and installed trail boardwalks and puncheons¹⁶ to help improve hiker access in marshy areas, cleared overgrown brush and vegetation along the trail corridor, removing and replacing deteriorating primitive foot bridges, and completing various trail maintenance tasks.

Funding Sources and In-kind Contributions

¹⁶ Puncheon are short-span footbridges or a series of connected short-span footbridges. Different terms may be used for a puncheon project depending on the geographic location of a trail project. Puncheons on the Appalachian Trail are not the same as puncheons built in the Rocky Mountains, or Sierras. Puncheon can be used where the soil is wet but does not contain enough water to require a trail bridge.

Between 2021 through 2023, Franklin's Promise was the direct recipient of several awards from the USFS totaling \$115,000 in federal funding to support CCFEC crew projects in and around Apalachicola. The Coalition provided 25 percent cash and in-kind match contributions that included the Corps' tools, equipment, supplies, administration, and leveraging fee-for-service fundings from other projects.

The CCFC and other programs under Franklin's Promise receive support, funding and resources through The Nature Conservancy's GulfCorps—a program funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the RESTORE Council. The goal of GulfCorps is to build sustainable Conservation Corps program capacity in the five States bordering the Gulf of Mexico in order to restore valuable coastal habitats and train local young adults in conservation job skills. GulfCorps has helped Franklin's Promise Coalition diversify its funding sources and project partners, build sustainable conservation Corps programs, and engage more local youth and young adults. Trail projects with the FTA, Apalachicola, and Blackwater River were supported by a combination of funding from The Corps Network's Opportunity Youth Service Initiative (AmeriCorps) program, federal contracts, and fee-for-service contracts from local partners.

Corpsmember Recruitment and Retention - Successful Methods and Challenges

Some of the best recruitment results can come from positive Word of Mouth referrals from Corpsmember alumni. Individuals who have successfully completed a CCFEC service term will often encourage others from their communities and families to enroll in a service term. Each year, CCFEC field staff would conduct outreach and recruitment to enroll new Corpsmembers for the upcoming program year. In prepandemic years, the CCFEC would perform in-person recruitment throughout Florida Panhandle communities by engaging with young adults and their families directly. These efforts were proven to be successful since the Corps is able to make personal connections, build holistic relationships, and promote the mission-driven goals of the program. These local recruitment strategies helped CCFEC find young adults who were more interested in the self-investment opportunity the Corps could offer rather than just the compensation. However, like most organizations, Franklin's Promise had to adjust quickly during the 2020 pandemic and the subsequent years. In-person recruitment switched entirely to electronic applications and online interviews. The CCFEC would receive many applications from applicants who were only looking for a job, but were not particularly interested in the workforce training benefits. The Corps lost some opportunities for personal connections and relationship building that promotes buy-in from the community. The CCFEC has recommitted to strategies for incorporating more in-person community connections and building upon that success from previous years.

Another challenge experienced is morale, which can oftentimes affect retention rates during a crew field season. Monotonous service projects that continue for days and weeks can lead to burnout and a lack of interest in continuing with the conservation field. Corps invest a lot of time and resources engaging their members in their workforce development programs, hoping those efforts lead their members on a trail and conservation career pathway. Ensuring that the work is meaningful and impactful is critical both for the project's success and for transforming that

individual's life. To address morale, the CCFEC engages with members as crews, and individually, through post-project meetings, creating a space where Corps staff and the Corpsmembers can communicate grievances, provide guidance, and work through personal issues that may be affecting their work. If members feel like they have a safe space and community to open up to, they are more likely to develop positive association with the Corps community and the conservation industry as a whole.

Some local economies where Corps are based can be very seasonal. During certain periods, local industries and businesses may temporarily have the capacity to employ young adults with competitive compensation, but cannot maintain those jobs throughout the year. A challenge for the Coalition, and other Corps in similar environments, is to strategize a value proposition for their program and effectively publicize this to their communities. For CCFEC, their Corpsmember retention success comes from offering competitive compensation, work opportunities year-round when local industries are slowing down, and providing wraparound services that address the immediate needs of Corpsmembers—such as counseling and a space to work on their educational goals.

Corpsmember Engagement - Training and Workforce Development

For years, CCFEC has engaged with young adults between the ages of 18 - 25 who were locally recruited from the Florida Panhandle coastal communities. Many of the Corpsmembers who join the program have little to no trail experience, come from underserved communities, or have immediate needs to address. The Corps' program model is built to empower young adults through hands-on experience, workforce education, and professional development. When new Corpsmembers join the CCFEC, Corps staff work with individuals on life skills training, personal goals, and leadership development while they serve on projects to ensure they are on a pathway for success. This may include helping a new Corpsmember complete their high school diploma, or incorporating lesson plans into crew projects and requiring that members complete essays and assignments related to their field work. This model has impacted many CCFEC alumni, some of whom have even been the first in their families to complete their education goals while serving with the CCFEC.

CCFEC will work with individuals on their hard and soft skills and provide orientations and trainings needed for service projects. Corpsmembers will receive training through the GulfCorps curriculum and receive industry recognized certifications such as: OSHA¹⁷, FEMA Disaster Training¹⁸, Wilderness First aid and CPR, Wildland Firefighting, and S-212 certifications. Since CCFEC is part of the GulfCorps program, each Corpsmember receives professional and workforce development training using the IMPACT curriculum¹⁹ created by The Corps Network.

¹⁷ Congress created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to ensure safe and healthful working conditions for workers by setting and enforcing standards and by providing training, outreach, education and assistance. <https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/3439at-a-glance.pdf>

¹⁸ The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/training>

¹⁹ The IMPACT curriculum addresses six different areas that lead to a successful professional development program - Individual Corps members Services, Management Systems, Pathways to Post Program Placement,

This includes professional development skill education, career exploration and workforce development strategies that ensure the Corpsmembers are properly prepared for their next steps in career and job placement.

All Corpsmembers who serve on CCFEC crews, and other Franklin's Promise programs, are enrolled through The Corps Network's Opportunity Youth Service Initiative (OYSI)²⁰ and Education Award Program. These are AmeriCorps-funded programs that support Corpsmember living allowances while they serve on trail and conservation projects. CCFEC Corpsmembers that successfully complete their OYSI AmeriCorps term are eligible to receive an Education Award (scholarship) that can be used to support future educational endeavors or to repay student loans.

About the Corps

The Conservation Corps of the Forgotten and Emerald Coast (CCFEC) – part of the Franklin's Promise Coalition – is a comprehensive youth development program for young adults 16 - 25 years of age (veterans up to 27) which provides participants (known as Corpsmembers) with job training, academic programming, leadership skills, and additional support through a strategy of service that conserves, protects and improves the environment, as well as community resilience. CCFEC continues to accomplish an array of specific habitat restoration projects throughout the region such as invasive species removal, living shoreline installation, oyster reef restoration, water quality monitoring, and pine savanna restoration.

Connecting with the Conservation Corps of the Forgotten and Emerald Coasts

For more information on partnerships, project development, and fee-for-service contracting, and partnership, reach out directly to the Franklin's Promise Coalition Executive Director or CCFEC Corps Director:

mail@franklinspromisecoalition.org

850-653-3930

franklinspromisecoalition.wildapricot.org

Bridge Buttress Trail

Corpsmembers complete technical rock restoration work that provides safe access to a mountain climbing area

Alumni Services, Connections to Employers, and Training for Members and Staff. The curriculum is an individually focused, member-driven, staff-managed approach that is integrated throughout the term of service with the main purpose being preparation to secure and maintain employment. Major components of the IMPACT model include skills and resources for members to access career pathways after completing their term, such as resume writing, mock interviews, time and stress management and goal setting and achievement.

²⁰ Launched in 2013 through an AmeriCorps grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service, The Corps Network's Opportunity Youth Service Initiative (OYSI) is designed to provide education and conservation service experience to young people experiencing barriers to furthering their educations or pursuing employment (e.g. poverty, unemployment, past court involvement, physical or learning disability). During their term of service, OYSI AmeriCorps members develop job skills, earn certifications, complete their high school requirements, and receive assistance in transitioning to postsecondary education or the workforce.

Appalachian Mountain Club

Project Partners and Sponsors

West Virginia Department of Transportation

West Virginia Recreational Trails Program

New River Gorge National Park and Preserve

The Access Fund

Friends of the New River Gorge

American Alpine Club

FHWA STRATEGIC GOALS

Safety; Transformation

Background and Overview - Safe Access to Climbing Areas

The New River Gorge National Park (NRG NP), located within southern West Virginia's Appalachian Mountains, is a popular and scenic destination for hiking, climbing, and river rafting. The park attracts hikers and mountain climbing enthusiasts that use popular trails leading to climbing access areas. In recent years, an increase in heavy foot traffic to the popular Bridge Buttress trail has contributed to severe erosion of the trail tread, soil loss, destabilization of the tread, and degradation of native plants. The main access point for this climbing area has become less stable over the years and has prompted safety concerns for visitors, including loose rocks, soil, and tripping hazards.

To help ensure visitor safety and build a more sustainable tread, NRG NP needed Substantial restoration and rock stabilization work along the bridge buttress trail. The Access Fund, a nonprofit rock climbing advocacy group, was the recipient of a West Virginia Recreational Trails Program (WV RTP) grant, through the West Virginia Department of Highways, that would support their efforts in providing safe access to rock climbing sites and trails on public land spaces. Both partners reached out to the Appalachian Conservation Corps (ACC), which has had a partnership presence in West Virginia and throughout the Appalachian region for years. Through other regional projects, the park was aware of ACC's work experience on technical rock and trail work and wanted to support a youth Conservation Corps. The goal is to have an experienced and trained ACC crew work alongside two Access Fund trail builders and NPS staff on the restoration and stabilization of the Bridge Buttress while engaging with young adults pursuing trail jobs and careers.

Project Work - Bridge Buttress Trail

The project work took place over one, 7-week field season at NRG NP between April-June 2021. The crew consisted of four Corpsmembers and two Crew Leaders who had prior experience with ACC and returned to lead this crew. Working Monday through Thursday for 10-hour day shifts, the crew deploys each day from a base camp within the park and hikes to the Bridge Buttress project site. During the first week, the crew received rigorous training and mentorship from ACC staff and project partners, learning about the National Park Service's

standards and expectations, public lands lessons, and career exploration with The Access Fund trail builders.

Corpsmembers were broken up into two groups, with each group having one professional trail builder work alongside and mentor their group for the duration of the project. Each group worked on both sides of the climbing area, installing grip hoists, highline wire, and other rigging devices that help move rocks safely into place. Once set up, the work required building a large rock staircase that would lead to the climbing area in a stable with techniques that would make the stairs and tread stable and sustainable for a high-use foot traffic. Both groups of Corpsmembers dug boulder and rock placements into both sides of the tread where the locally quarried rocks would be set. Some rock carving and cutting was applied and trail tread cutting in between the rocks to help keep them sturdy and in place and to naturalize the area.

1,399 Corpsmember hours

48 locally quarried rock steps built

155 cubic feet of crush fill used

52 square feet of retaining wall built

Funding Sources and In-kind Contributions

The Access Fund was the direct recipient of a WV RTP grant and contracted the ACC, which was the subrecipient of \$48,000 in funding to support the Bridge Buttress project. ACC provided a \$16,000 in-kind partner match contribution towards the grant, which included Corpsmember value of volunteer time, tools and equipment. ACC provided their own rigging equipment and specialized rock work tools and equipment, such as: Double jack hammers/sledge hammers, Rock bars, Pick mattocks axes, Double and single jacks. Other tools and supplies were provided by The Access Fund, such as: rock wedges and carving tools. Additional support was provided by the American Alpine Club, which hosted the ACC crew at a campground for the crew's base camp and allowed them to stay there during their off time.

Corpsmember Recruitment and Retention - Successful Methods and Challenges

Due to project planning and development taking place during a pandemic year, recruitment for the crew was entirely conducted remotely and virtual. ACC staff searched for Corpsmember young adults between the ages of 19 - 24 that were enthusiastic for trail and recreation careers and wanted to develop skills and experience in this industry. A best practice that ACC has applied over the years is retaining Crew Leaders that have served with ACC previously over multiple seasons and years. Looking for experienced Crew Leaders can be difficult, so it's an ACC preference to support returning Crew Leaders that have already been through the program.

The ACC uses its in-house program recruiter—a full-time staff person responsible for new Corpsmember outreach and recruitment. The ACC recruiter will attend virtual job fairs, post conservation crew job announcements to national job boards, and use college and university Handshake portals. The ACC implements a standardized interview process for all Corpsmember applicants and makes a selection within a week's time. The ACC has found that

investing in a full-time recruiter has been successful with the turnaround time in finding qualified applicants for trail projects that require technical skill and experience. Oftentimes, other conservation Corps programs will have field and seasonal staff that are also responsible for recruitment, which creates a slower turnaround time in finalizing a field crew. For the Bridge Buttress project, the ACC had no issues with recruiting new Corpsmembers, even in the midst of a challenging pandemic year.

Corpsmember Engagement - Training and Workforce Development

All new Corpsmembers who are selected for a ACC field season crew receive orientations and training out of their base office in the Shenandoah region of Virginia and deploy regionally to their project sites. Corpsmembers learn about Conservation Legacy and ACC program policies, AmeriCorps, and Public Land Corps hiring authority²¹ guidance. ACC will provide all Corpsmembers orientation in backcountry camping, best practices in safety and wellness in field work, lessons in trail maintenance, restoration, and safe use of tools and equipment. The crew experience included space for education, mentorship, and discussion with project partners - NRG park staff, Access Fund trail builders, etc.—about job opportunities and how to pursue this type of work as a career.

For the Bridge Buttress trail project, the crew received specific training in rock work and restoration. The Corpsmembers met with the project partners in the beginning of the field season, learned about rigging, received road safety training, and how to safely manage rock through cutting, carving, and mortar techniques. Corpsmembers learned how to make and use technical rigging techniques, such as high line and using a Capstan Winch²² — which is powered that can move rock quickly — and learned about pulley systems and the ratios needed to pick up and move rocks efficiently.

About the Corps

Appalachian Conservation Corps (ACC) is a program of Conservation Legacy, a nationwide network of conservation service organizations envisioning a world with healthy lands, air, and water, thriving people, and resilient communities.

The ACC works to connect young people to critical conservation service projects across the Appalachian region and neighboring communities in Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, D.C., and Pennsylvania. As a Corps program, ACC partners with public land managers to identify, plan, and complete projects that improve public access, habitat quality, and economic development. Our programs focus on place-based learning, life skills development, appreciation of diversity, civic responsibility, and career development. ACC also provides an opportunity for

²¹ The Public Land Corps Act created a program that provides young people - age 16 to 30 - the opportunity to work on conservation projects on public lands. Participants must successfully complete 640 hours, that include at least 120 hours on federal lands, through the Public Lands Corps with the National Park Service and other participating land management agencies to be eligible for a hiring authority certificate that can be used to apply for federal land management jobs. <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/elips/documents/pb-21-09-departmental-policy-on-public-lands-corps-hiring-authority-11.5.2021.pdf>

²² Capstans are generally used to assist in the lifting or pulling of heavy objects in the form of winches.

members to learn about the local environment and the issues affecting it, and introduces individuals to recreation and resource management careers.

Connecting with the Appalachian Conservation Corps

For more information on partnerships, project development, fee-for-service contracting, and partnership, connect with the ACC program director:

<https://appalachiancc.org/contact>

540-383-1297

Appendix

About The Corps Network

Established in 1985, The Corps Network is the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps. Our more than 130 Corps provide young adults and veterans the opportunity to serve our country through projects on public lands and in rural and urban communities. The Corps Network supports Corps by advocating on their behalf, providing access to funding and projects, and offering expertise in Corps operations and programming.

- **Our Mission:** The Corps Network advances programs that transform young people's lives and communities through career development, conservation, and civic engagement.
- **Our Vision:** A high-quality Corps serving every community in America.

Trail and Transportation Page

Our Trail and transportation page serves as a portal for Conservation Corps staff, state trail programs, and federal land managers who are looking for resources and guidance on how to partner with Service and Conservation Corps. The page offers a growing resource and video library, photo gallery, and technical assistance on how to connect with a local Corps for trail projects and career pathways.

Resource Library

The trail and transportation resource library is recommended for those looking for guidance on how to connect with their state trail program, learn more about federal-aid funding programs, review model contracts and agreements, access The Corps Network's publications and documents, and read Conservation Corps case studies on transportation and trail project best practices.

Video Library

Our Trail and Transportation video library highlights field level footage of Corpsmember serving on trail and transportation projects and candid stories from Corpsmembers who share their transformational experiences working with their Corps. New videos will be uploaded periodically to showcase the type of work getting done through state trail program and federal funding support.

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Visit The Corps Network's Trail and Transportation page:

<https://corpsnetwork.org/programs-initiatives/trails-and-transportation/>

Nonprofit Trail Organizations and Programs

The following are national nonprofit trail organizations with a history of working with youth conservation Corps and federal land managers on recreational trail projects. These organizations advocate for the use of Corps in legislation and policy, provide small grants and funding opportunities, offer educational programming, host national trail conferences and events, and serve as comprehensive resources on strengthening trail programs and initiatives. These organizations are recommended partners for Corps looking for guidance, technical assistance, and direction in how to build relationships with the recreational trails community.

Partners for the National Trail System

The Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS) connects member nonprofit trail organizations and federal agency partners to further the protection, completion, and stewardship of the 30 national scenic and historic trails within the National Trails System.

The PNTS advocates on behalf of the National Trails System as a whole for land preservation and stewardship resources. Other major roles of the PNTS include the collection and dissemination of National Trails news and the development of outreach initiatives and youth programming.

<https://pnts.org>

American Hiking Society

The American Hiking Society is a nonprofit dedicated to preserving trails, the areas that surround them and the hiking experience with three main avenues of action: Volunteerism and Outreach; Policy and Advocacy; and Trail grants and assistance.

www.americanhiking.org

American Trails

American Trails is a comprehensive online source for planning, building, designing, funding, managing, enhancing, and supporting trails, greenways, and blueways. Since 1988, American Trails has been a training resource and collective voice for a diverse coalition of trail enthusiasts, professionals, advocates, land managers, conservationists, and friends of the outdoors and livable cities.

<https://www.americantrails.org/>

Coalition for Recreational Trails Annual Achievement Awards

This awards program recognizes outstanding uses of Recreational Trails Program (RTP) funds, showcasing excellent projects made possible by RTP funding and enhancing awareness and appreciation of the RTP among Members of Congress and other key officials. This award is given out by the Coalition for Recreational Trails, a federation of national and regional trail-related organizations

<https://www.americantrails.org/communications/awards/crtAwards>

Partnership Acknowledgments

The following are project partners and sponsors who have supported the conservation corps projects featured in these case studies either through direct grants, fundraising, volunteer support, or in-kind contributions. Some may have sponsored Corps as direct recipients through federal and state awards while others subcontracted Corps for their services. The support of these partners have been invaluable to the overall successful implementation of a Corps' trail program, strengthening community relationships, and creating workforce opportunities for Corpsmembers.

National and Regional Partners

National Park Foundation
National Park Service
The Nature Conservancy
U.S. Forest Service

Local, State and Regional Partners

American Alpine Club
Apalachicola National Forest
Blackwater River State Forest
Burnham Wildlife Corridor
Chequamegon Area Mountain Bike Association
Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest
Chicago Department of Transportation
Chicago Park District
Climb Community Development Corporation
De Soto National Forest
Duke Energy Foundation
Florida Trail Association
Franklin's Promise Coalition
Friends of the New River Gorge
Grand Traverse Land Conservancy
GulfCorps
 RESTORE Council
 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
 The Nature Conservancy
 The Corps Network
 Student Conservation Association
Harrison County Emergency Management Administration
Huron-Manistee National Forest
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
New River Gorge National Park and Preserve
North Country Trail Association
The Ember Alliance
The Access Fund

Traverse Area Regional Trails (TART)
West Virginia Department of Transportation
West Virginia Recreational Trails Program
Wilderness State Park
WRD Environmental

List of Corps Featured in the Guide

Chicago Green Corps

445 N Sacramento Blvd #204
Chicago, IL 60612
312-746-9777

**Climb Community Development Corporation,
Climb Conservation Corps**

1316 30th Avenue
Gulfport, Mississippi 39501
228-864-6677

Conservation Legacy

701 Camino del Rio, Suite 101
Durango, CO 81301
970-403-1149

Appalachian Conservation Corps

124 Old Bridgewater Rd,
Mt Crawford, VA 22841
540-383-1297

Franklin's Promise Coalition

192 14th St,
Apalachicola, FL 32320
850-653-3930

Conservation Corps of the Forgotten and Emerald Coasts

60 Island Dr
Eastpoint, FL 32328
850-323-0176

SEEDS EcoCorps

800 Cottageview Dr., Ste 1080
Traverse City, MI 49684
231-947-0312

Wisconsin Conservation Corps

205 5th Ave S STE 400
La Crosse, WI 54601
608-782-2494