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**The National
Association of Service
and Conservation
Corps' Welfare to
Work Project:
Identifying Promising
Practices**

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Background

Service and conservation corps (corps) are community-based organizations that provide youth with educational support and the opportunity to participate in community service activities in which they learn work skills. Most participating youth (corpsmembers) are economically disadvantaged youth between ages 16 and 25. Corps aim to achieve two primary goals: (1) meet local communities' needs for essential services, and (2) help the youth who participate to develop academic, job, and life skills that enable them to become productive members of their communities.

The National Association of Conservation Corps (NASCC) was formed in 1985 to help corps operate more effectively and thereby to better serve youth and communities. NASCC supports corps by providing them with information about promising practices and by providing them with access to an on-line database of relevant articles. NASCC also provides corps with training and technical assistance on a variety of issues, ranging from member retention and development, to staff development, to organizational sustainability. In addition, NASCC advocates for corps' interests at a national policy level.

NASCC and the Welfare to Work Project

From 1999 through 2003, NASCC obtained a Round #3 Welfare-to-Work competitive grant of approximately \$3.8 million from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). DOL's Welfare-to-Work grant program was designed to serve individuals who receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), non-custodial parents and others who have characteristics associated with long-term welfare dependence obtain jobs. Programs funded were required to use a "work-first" strategy and to engage participants in employment-based activities throughout their tenure in transitional programs.¹

NASCC used this funding to run the Welfare to Work (WtW) Project, a program in which it worked with nine corps to provide TANF-eligible youth with service learning experiences that were geared to help them transition out of poverty and into employment.²

When selecting corps with which to co-apply for this funding, NASCC chose programs that served economically disadvantaged youth and either were interested in expanding their services to include TANF-eligible youth or were likely already to serve TANF-eligible youth. NASCC also chose corps that were relatively high functioning, because it believed that those corps would be able to develop targeted services quickly and thereby get the WtW project established at their sites as soon as they were awarded funding. Also, NASCC believed that these corps would be able to collect the data required by DOL. Corps that participated in the WtW project were: New Jersey Youth Corps of

¹ <http://wtw.doleta.gov/competitive>.

² NASCC and the corps applied for funding for the Welfare to Work Project in April 1999. They were awarded funding in September to begin program operations in October of 1999. The grant was slated to last for 30 months. However, NASCC requested and got a no-cost extension so that they could conduct adequate follow-up with corpsmembers. Accordingly, most sites were funded through September 2003.

Camden; the Ohio Civilian Conservation Corps of Cleveland and Columbus; the Dallas Youth Services Corps; New Jersey Youth Corps of Newark/ International Youth Organization; the New Jersey Youth Corps of Paterson; the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps in Taos, New Mexico; and the New Jersey Youth Corps of Vineland.

Seven of these sites participated in the WtW Project through the entire funding period (approximately four years). For reasons unrelated to the WtW Project, the entire Dallas Corps ceased operations in November 2001 and, accordingly, stopped operating under the grant. The Rocky Mountain Youth Corps dropped out of the Project nine months after Project inception because it was unable to enroll the targeted number of TANF-eligible corpsmembers.

Participating corps received approximately 75 percent of the DOL funding so that they could develop enhanced services and supports for TANF-eligible corpsmembers. NASCC used the remainder of the grant to provide participating corps with a variety of supports and services. Specifically, NASCC provided corps with training and technical assistance in supporting, placing and providing employment follow-up services to TANF-eligible individuals. (Over the course of the grant, NASCC held three conferences for participating sites in which speakers from nationally recognized welfare-to-work programs met with corps to discuss strategies for helping low-income individuals obtain and retain employment.) NASCC also served as an intermediary between the DOL and the participating corps. In this capacity, NASCC interpreted DOL's guidelines for the grant for corps, helped corps fulfill DOL's reporting requirements and developed reports for DOL and ensured that participating corps complied with DOL requirements. NASCC also developed information management systems at NASCC so that it could track all of the WtW corpsmembers. Finally, NASCC used a significant proportion of its budget to fund an Abt Associates assessment of the project and to produce a Guide for Practitioners who implemented similar programs that was co-authored by NASCC and Abt Associates.

In its proposal to DOL, NASCC corps established concrete performance outcome targets. Through the WtW Project, NASCC planned to enroll 300 TANF-eligible youths in corps programs and place 220 of them in unsubsidized employment after they completed the program. Ultimately, NASCC exceeded these targets, enrolling 446 TANF-eligible youths and placing 246 of them (a little over 55 percent) in unsubsidized employment.³

While all of the participating corps enrolled economically disadvantaged youth prior to their participation in the WtW Project, none had previously formally targeted TANF-eligible youth. After receiving WtW funding, they targeted this population and expanded the services they offered to better meet these youths' needs for employment and life supports. Specifically, each corps hired a job developer and expanded case management services. Corps also used DOL funding to provide expanded support services to TANF-eligible corpsmembers.

Rationale for this Study

NASCC is conducting this study to learn how best to develop and implement community service programs that facilitate the employment and post-placement support of TANF-eligible and other low-

³ Note that these totals are higher than those reported in Appendix B. This is because the totals reported in Appendix B do not include results for the two corps that dropped out of the program: Taos and Dallas.

income young adults. This study is not a traditional evaluation in that it is more concerned with identifying promising practices than with assessing the performance of specific welfare-to-work programs. By identifying promising practices and sharing them with corps across the country, NASCC will be able more effectively to support corps staff as they develop programs for low-income youth and will make an important contribution to the youth employment and development field.

In November 2002, NASCC contracted with Abt Associates, a nationally recognized public policy research firm, to conduct this “promising practices assessment.” This study addresses these three research questions:

1. How was the WtW Project implemented?
2. What were key WtW Project outcomes?
3. What are promising practices in helping economically disadvantaged youth to obtain academic, life, and job skills and to transition into employment?

Methodology

To address these research questions, Abt Associates engaged in several tasks. First, we conducted in-depth case studies of all seven corps that both completed the WtW Project and remained in operation through January 2003.⁴ Conducting these case studies entailed interviewing program staff and program participants, touring project sites, and reviewing key project documents. Abt Associates also interviewed NASCC’s President and Director of the Welfare to Work Project and conducted a focus group with Corps Program Directors at the NASCC Annual Meeting in February 2003. In addition, we reviewed data that NASCC and DOL collected regarding individual corps’ performance in the Project. (Specifically, we assessed outcome data that illustrated corps’ success in enrolling and placing WtW corpsmembers and in helping them to remain employed for at least six months.) Finally, we conducted a literature review regarding effective strategies for helping TANF-eligible youth advance their education and transition out of poverty and into employment.

Key Findings

Our research provided us with answers to each of the three research questions. Those findings are summarized below.

How Was the WtW Project Implemented?

Participating corps offered a similar range of standard services that comprised the basic program, specifically training in job, life and work skills, and an employment preparation and community service program in which corpsmembers learn work skills by participating in stipended service projects. Despite these similarities, however, certain aspects of key corps components differed among the sites. The most notable differences among participating corps were in the kinds of community service experiences they offered corpsmembers and the extent and quality of the partnerships they had established with other local service providers.

⁴ It was not possible for us to conduct site visits to the Dallas Youth Services Corps because it had ceased to exist. It did not make sense for us to visit the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps in Taos because it dropped out of the WtW Project.

The way in which the WtW Project was implemented was fairly similar across the sites. In its proposal for DOL funding, NASCC stipulated that each corps would employ a job developer and either hire a case manager or reallocate staff time such that the current case manager had more time to provide WtW corpsmembers with individualized counseling.⁵ As a result, all WtW corps provided WtW corpsmembers with individualized counseling and provided all corpsmembers with expanded employability training and job development services.

After hiring the requisite staff, WtW Corps began the processes of (1) recruiting participants, (2) identifying existing corpsmembers who were eligible for WtW, and (3) enrolling new WtW participants. While in the corps, Welfare to Work corpsmembers were mainstreamed into standard program activities in such a way that no stigma resulted. All corpsmembers participated in an array of academic and employment training and in some paid off-site community service activities. In addition, all corpsmembers received a variety of life skills trainings, such as parenting, STD and drug awareness, and anger management.

Academic training, some employment training and stipended community service were standard elements of corps programs that corps continued as they participated in the WtW Project. Conversely, expanded job development activities, individualized counseling services and the provision of certain material supports to individual corpsmembers were program enhancements brought about through the WtW Project.

Like their peers who were not part of the WtW Project, most WtW corpsmembers remained in corps programs for between 6 and 12 months (though some WtW corpsmembers cycled in and out of the program and others rushed to full-time jobs because they were concerned that their TANF benefits were running out). Most WtW corpsmembers who participated received both their TANF payments and a small stipend of approximately \$5.00 to \$5.50 per hour for work in community service.⁶

After successfully completing the corps and being placed into unsubsidized employment, WtW corpsmembers received post-program support services geared to promote job retention and advancement as well as the pursuit of higher education. Corps staff remained in contact with WtW corpsmembers for a minimum of one year after corpsmembers were placed.

What Were Key WtW Project Outcomes?

Ultimately, NASCC enrolled 446 TANF-eligible youths and placed 246 of them (a little over 55 percent) in jobs.⁷ In addition, 47 percent of the corpsmembers who participated in one of the seven corps that completed the program remained employed for six months after placement.

The WtW Program also yielded some important and enduring benefits for participating corps. Many corps added employment training modules that were created as part of WtW to their standard

⁵ National Association of Conservation Corps et al., *Application for Federal Assistance*, April 30, 1999, p. 2.

⁶ WtW corpsmembers were paid different wages depending on (1) the corps in which they were enrolled and (2) their tenure in the corps.

⁷ Note that these totals are higher than those reported in Appendix B. This is because the totals reported in Appendix B do not include results for the two corps that dropped out of the program: Taos and Dallas.

curricula and continued to work with local employers and/or provide enhanced placement and job development services after the Project ended. Several corps also expanded the follow-up services that they provided all corpsmembers and developed new strategies for serving TANF-eligible youth. Finally, a number of corps developed new or more positive relationships with local service providers (such as departments of welfare and/or social services) and believed that those relationships would endure beyond the WtW Project.

What are Promising Practices in Helping Economically Disadvantaged Youth to Obtain Academic, Life, and Job Skills and to Transition into Employment?

Based on our review of program data, case studies, interviews with corps staff, and the literature, we have identified some particularly effective strategies that corps may use to help youth obtain academic, life, and job skills and transition into employment. We also have noted several tactics that NASCC may use to help corps achieve these goals, and highlighted those tactics that corps are likely to deem particularly beneficial.

Promising practices for helping economically disadvantaged youth to obtain academic, life and job skills and to transition into employment include:

- Hiring an effective job developer,
- Providing intensive support services,
- Helping participants to actuate *their* goals,
- Successfully partnering with outside providers,
- Using performance data to guide strategic planning and to assess staff performance,
- Maintaining an employment-focused approach in all aspects of the program,
- Marketing the program to employers and focusing on both participants' and employers' needs, and
- Targeting retention and following up with corpsmembers after placement.

Promising practices for NASCC to use when launching employment and training programs with corps include:

- Serving as an intermediary and connecting local corps with DOL or other government funding and providing both funders and participating corps with support,
- Providing flexible funding,
- Providing corps with sufficient pre-program planning time,
- Facilitating trainings in which other service providers share lessons learned, and
- Developing clear reporting requirements upfront.