

AmeriCorps celebrates 25 years of service

By OCS Executive Director Dan Ritter

Happy 25th Anniversary AmeriCorps! Each year, over 75,000 people serve in AmeriCorps across the US. Since 1994, national service has improved lives and landscapes, while transforming those who commit to serve. Service to others is an American tradition and, for over 25 years, AmeriCorps has unified diverse people through service to others.

AmeriCorps grew from a renewed focus on civic engagement in America during the 1990s. President George H.W. Bush signed the 1990 National Service Act, creating the Commission on National and Community Service and funding national service pilot programs. In 1993, President Bill Clinton proposed and signed legislation creating AmeriCorps and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). That same year, the Governor's Office of Community Service and the Governor-appointed Montana Commission on Community Service were formed to promote and expand national service and volunteer opportunities in Montana.

On September 12, 1994, former Governor Racicot swore in Montana's first 56 AmeriCorps members on the Capitol lawn. Earl Old Person, Blackfeet, introduced the opening ceremony and George Dennison, Chair of the first Montana Commission on Community Service, addressed the crowd. The first members served at Browning, Belknap, and with the Conservation Corps. Later that year, another 142 members joined. Over 10,000 Montanans have now served with AmeriCorps, earning over 23.8 million dollars for post-secondary education.

Last year, more than 800 AmeriCorps members served at more than 600 locations across our state, meeting urgent needs and serving our communities, while gaining valuable skills and experience to advance their careers. Big Sky Watershed Corps, Montana Conservation Corps and Montana State Parks AmeriCorps members protect public lands, educate state parks visitors, and restore at risk ecosystems and waterways. Montana Energy Corps and 100 Fold Studio Corps conserve energy, provide innovative design solutions that maximize resources and improve efficiency in our schools and communities. Justice for Montanans, Community in Action Corps, and Montana Campus Compact provide direct services to citizens through health departments, nonprofits, and schools. Senior Corps engages over 4,500 Montanans into service, helping school children, other seniors, and partnering with many common- good focused organizations.

Martin Luther King Jr said, "Everybody can be great because everybody can serve." These words have never rang truer with hundreds of AmeriCorps and VISTA members serving Montanans every day, improving environments and public lands. Throughout their service terms, AmeriCorps members gain skills and resources, while communities become safer, smarter, and healthier. AmeriCorps alumni often stay in Montana, leading businesses, delivering nonprofit missions, and serving as AmeriCorps supervisors and program leaders.

In Montana, AmeriCorps serves as an inspiration across generations, inviting us to invest in civic engagement. In an op-ed observing AmeriCorps' 5th anniversary, former Governor Racicot stated, "It is precisely the job of government to foster good citizenship; our democracy depends on it." Those words resonate the same today as they did twenty years ago.

As we recognize the 25th Anniversary of AmeriCorps, it's an opportunity to reflect and celebrate the legacy of service in Montana. Let this occasion represent a renewal of the call to serve for all Montanans. From local volunteerism, to a year national service, we can each serve in our own way. Join us!

Visit serve.mt.gov to learn more. If you know a previous or current AmeriCorps member, VISTA, or a Senior Corps volunteer, thank them for serving.

On behalf of the Governor's Office of Community Service, thank you to all national service members who have and continue to serve Montana. You are valued. We are grateful for your contributions and continued service in our communities.