

D I A L O G U E

# CLIMATE CORPS: SKILLS-BASED TRAINING TO COMBAT THE CLIMATE CRISIS

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## SUMMARY

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Last September, the Biden Administration announced the American Climate Corps, a workforce training and service initiative with the goal of giving young people skills-based training for careers in the clean energy, conservation, and climate resilience sectors. The initiative will offer 20,000 Americans paid training in a variety of environmental fields, specifically prioritize equity and environmental justice, and collaborate with federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, and tribal, state, and local governments. On November 29, 2023, the Environmental Law Institute hosted a panel of experts to discuss the American Climate Corps program and existing climate corps programs across the country. Below, we present a transcript of that discussion, which has been edited for style, clarity, and space considerations.

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**Marianne Lavelle** (moderator) is a reporter and writer for *Inside Climate News*.

**Ken Goodson** is National Director of AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps.

**Rola Halawanji** is Program Director of Bay Area Community Resources' California Climate Action Corps.

**Jake Pollack** is a Senior Director at Strategic Energy Innovations.

**Marianne Lavelle:** The American Climate Corps was part of President Joseph Biden's idea for addressing climate from the very start, and he announced the rollout last September. There are going to be some big announcements.<sup>1</sup> One thing I want to say about Climate Corps is that people seem to think of it as kind of a descendant of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps. In some ways, the Climate Corps goes beyond Roosevelt's program, by dealing with a planetary crisis and incorporating things like environmental justice into the work.

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*Author's Note: Ken Goodson's permission to publish this Dialogue does not constitute an endorsement by either him or the U.S. government of the Environmental Law Institute or its activities.*

1. Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Launches American Climate Corps to Train Young People in Clean Energy, Conservation, and Climate Resilience Skills, Create Good-Paying Jobs and Tackle the Climate Crisis, White House (Sept. 20, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/20/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-launches-american-climate-corps-to-train-young-people-in-clean-energy-conservation-and-climate-resilience-skills-create-good-paying-jobs-and-tackle-the-climate/>.

I look forward to the panelists' presentations. I want to ask each of you to talk about what inspired you to get involved in youth training in skills to address the climate crisis. I will start with Ken Goodson, the director of AmeriCorps.

**Ken Goodson:** I serve as the director of AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), one of the four major programs of AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteering. AmeriCorps NCCC is the one program that's wholly administered and operated by the federal agency. Most of what we do at AmeriCorps is make awards and grants through our three other major programs. NCCC is different.

I've been with AmeriCorps for a little more than a decade. I was previously with the Peace Corps for about 15 years, starting as an environmental conservation volunteer before moving into staff roles that had me in six different countries, ending in my hardship post, which was Washington, D.C.

Two things inspired me to get into this work. One, I had an opportunity previously to work at the grassroots level. Then I also had the opportunity to work at the macro policy level during a stint at the Millennium Challenge Corporation. I believe that with something that is such an existential threat, like climate change, you really need both those polar ends operating. You need the big-picture policy pieces, but you really do need the grassroots, hyperlocal, civic-engaged approach as well. And that's the space that I like to be in: the hyper-grassroots.

I also find young adults inspiring. That was part of the reason I ended up with a Peace Corps career and part of the reason that I am at AmeriCorps now. The NCCC program is for 18- to 26-year-olds. Any time I have concerns about

the future direction of our nation or the world, I spend a little time around those young adults and find that my confidence about the future is perhaps more positive than if I rely just on other sources of information.

I really like being around that energy, and strongly believe that young adults represent the future for us and the path to potential solutions for significant challenges like climate change. I feel confident we have a good cadre of future leaders in that group and feel privileged to be a part of supporting them to start that professional journey.

**Marianne Lavelle:** Across the country, people haven't been just waiting and doing nothing for the nationwide Climate Corps to get off the ground. There has been a lot of activity by nonprofits and at the local level. I'll ask Rola Halawanji, from Bay Area Community Resources, to talk about what your organization is doing and how you got involved.

**Rola Halawanji:** This is an interesting question because one of the things I always share with our members is that a journey is never a straightforward path. I'm a classic example of this. I grew up in Africa. I spent my childhood in Ivory Coast and my teen years in Tunisia. After I graduated from high school, I had no idea what I wanted to do. But I knew deep down in my core that I needed to pursue a higher education. Where I come from, that's not something that is required for a young female.

I wanted to go to France, and my parents said no. So, I came back a year later and I told them, well, if you don't want me to go two hours away, I'll just go across the world; I want to go to California to study English. It was a tough pill to swallow for my family, but I'm very grateful that they understood my passion for education and also supported me in making a major shift. Again, it's very uncommon for young females like me to leave their country and go across the world.

I'm telling you this because I think it's that deep passion for education that brought me here. It completely changed the course of my life. I had no expectation whatsoever to be in this space today. I was aware to some extent, but at that time, environmental impact was not on my radar; rather, I was more interested in business management and global management.

I graduated from the University of Southern California School of Business and realized that I completely hated it. I felt like a fish out of water, that it wasn't my thing, and that pushed me to the nonprofit sector. I was doing a master's degree in Shanghai, China. It was during that experience that I realized the impact of human action on our environment. One example I'd like to share is that the first week I was in Shanghai, I was lightheaded the whole time because there was not enough oxygen in the air. All the pollution was trapped in the core of Shanghai, which led me to be interested in urban design, and I eventually landed on environmental port policies.

It brought me back to the United States, and it was perfect timing. At that time, the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles were implementing their Green Port Policies. I got a chance to stumble into work force development, work-

ing on programs to prepare people for green careers and develop training programs that would fill the gap for qualified people to work in this sector.

All this to say that I've had a lot of experience building programs. I stumbled onto climate change and the environmental sector, but I also found a deep passion combining education with wanting to make an impact on our world or the environment that we work in.

California Climate Action Corps (CCAC) is a relatively young program. It started as a pilot in January 2021. I came in the picture in the summer of 2021. What I thought was going to be a temporary program turned into one of the largest AmeriCorps programs in California. We have grown and expanded tremendously. We're in partnership with California Volunteers and also Strategic Energy Innovations (SEI) and the Energy Coalition.

We were able to build a foundation for the Climate Corps that really focuses on direct action. This is a bit unique because there are a lot of AmeriCorps programs focused in the field of climate change, but this program specifically is focused in three areas—urban greening, organic waste and food recovery, and wildfire resiliency—which are three priority areas for California.

Our impact is tangible. We're not putting proposals together or doing research, but rather working directly with community residents and participants to uplift their communities.

**Marianne Lavelle:** Jake Pollack works for SEI, one of the many groups that have been working on building youth skills right on the ground. Tell us about yourself, how you came to this, and what SEI does in this space.

**Jake Pollack:** For more than 25 years, SEI has been a community-based nonprofit. It now has expanded nationally, but we started our Climate Corps Program in California and have closely partnered with Bay Area Community Resources over many years. We have really learned from them and learned with them how to grow the program into new states. Since 2010, we've had SEI's Climate Corps, originally an AmeriCorps program. It's expanded out to include all sectors and to not be AmeriCorps-specific, though we do still have one AmeriCorps program.

In that time, we've seen all kinds of scopes. Rola mentioned some great examples of what's needed in California. Certainly, in other regions different scopes are needed. We really try to assess and listen deeply to what communities need on the ground and to be responsive to that. We find creative and sometimes scrappy ways to fund fellows' work, and to work with community-based organizations when we can and bring fellows from those communities into those roles as much as possible.

To date, we've created more than 500 partnerships to host 800 fellows across the United States. We've done this for a while, but we're also still trying to innovate. On some level, we're really an upstart and part of a group that's thinking of this at a national scale—the scale that is needed for the response to the climate crisis. So, we're excited to be in

this mix now. It feels like a wonderful idea is finally taking shape and gathering some real momentum.

My entry into the field has some echoes of Ken's and Rola's international experiences. I've been thinking about climate for almost 20 years, and worked for the first half of that in higher education and in study abroad programs—in South Asia, the Bahamas, and other places—really thinking about how people live well in a place and the equity issues that are almost inherent in any urban, non-urban, or international setting, and bringing people into the field through that lens as opposed to strictly managerial sustainability or thinking about climate from a policy level.

Then, I started teaching at the University of Oregon in their Policy Department and led workshops for mid-career professionals for a number of years. I noticed that, for mid-career folks, they were happy with focusing on policy, and it was most important for them to show incremental change in the systems and programs that they're working in across different sectors—water, waste, energy, and so on, in the general areas of work you'd expect for the field. But I also saw some of the mind-sets for earlier career folks. Instead of thinking about sustainability as a steady state, or that we're somehow able to solve these challenges with business as usual, we shifted over to resilience thinking and giving folks coming into the field a mind-set that was much more expansive. That included climate impacts and environmental justice.

It was much more comprehensive and set them on a different path in terms of their hearts and minds and what they wanted to do in the field, how they thought they were going to do it, and where they thought those levers for change actually were in the different sectors that they wanted to work in.

Then, relatively soon after that, I found that I wanted to be able to do that work in a more expansive way. In coming to SEI about seven years ago, I was able to work at a much larger scale, which was exciting and also a bit daunting.

One of the things I immediately found, in taking that mind-set, shifting over to resilience thinking with these fellows, these early career folks in SEI's Climate Corps, was that we really needed to start thinking about personal resilience. At least at a minimum being trauma-aware or trauma-informed, in terms of the approaches that we took to training people going into the field.

I don't know that we can ever really ensure people aren't burning out within a couple of years by giving them the tools, the resources, and the community connections that they need to be successful. But I think at this point we are responsive to that, and we help provide a buffer. We realize it's just as important as the skills training.

For example, in more than half of the years I've been at SEI, we've had incredible wildfires. All of these fellows experience wildfires directly or indirectly, whether it's vicarious traumatization in the communities they're working in or they were actually displaced by wildfire. What we realized was that these folks are coming in having experienced Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Sandy as youth. So, they've already seen climate impacts. It's a different generation than mine, than many of my peers

and many folks I work with who are older and have more experience in the field.

My key inspiration now for the work is this sense of an intergenerational imperative. The people coming into the field are as old as my work experience in the field, which is mind-blowing, but it gives me pause. Basically, as Ken too wondered, how can I be inspired? How can I learn from them? The field continues to evolve, and it's not like we have all the answers. So, how can we stay open to fully learn from them? That's what keeps me coming back to this work every morning. It's the challenges.

**Marianne Lavelle:** Such good points there, that young people have a completely different lived experience of climate than many of us who are older and didn't have those formative years of being hit by one disaster after another. I do want to circle back to what you talked about, being trauma-informed, and addressing this with your work force.

But first, let's talk about what Climate Corps looks like or what we're hoping it looks like on the ground. There have been some recent developments, so I want to go to Ken to talk specifically about the Forest Corps program and those developments. Tell us about what young people would be doing in that program.

**Ken Goodson:** AmeriCorps members have been engaged in climate action for many years. This is sort of the bedrock of what the agency makes possible. In fiscal year 2022 alone, there was \$117 million in grant funding that went toward climate resilience. And that is an increase. So, it's something that is ticking up.

The program where I work, AmeriCorps NCCC, has for a long time worked at the state level with the U.S. Forest Service to help fill some gaps in needs for conservation and fire management-style work. That state-level work actually evolved in recent years and became a regional partnership in the southeastern United States with the Forest Service's Southern Region and the AmeriCorps NCCC's Southern Region as well. We've been running that for about three years now. We were approached by the Forest Service a little over a year ago and asked about our interest in scaling what had been a state-level agreement and then evolved into a regional one. The Service approached us asking whether there was interest in collaborating at the national level.

For those of you who are familiar with the AmeriCorps NCCC program, you will know that we had administered something called FEMA Corps. In a nutshell, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) after Hurricane Katrina—going back to Jake's point—had seen the work that AmeriCorps NCCC teams could do in the disaster response and recovery space.

FEMA also looked at their own work force and believed that they needed this infusion of young talent, fresh ideas, and individuals who had not only classroom knowledge of emergency management, but some real on-the-ground application of emergency management skills. They approached us and, long story short, for a little more than 12 years we've been administering the FEMA Corps

program, which allows young adults aged 18 to 26 to spend the service term focused on disaster response and recovery efforts.

Seventy percent of those program participants in 2022 received a job offer from FEMA, so it is a pipeline to employment. There's a Venn diagram you can imagine that shows community need, post-service employment opportunity, and young adults interested in doing this type of work. The Forest Corps is built on that same type of foundation. The Forest Service believes that model potentially can help them both advance their wildfire and reforestation strategies, and also help build a potential cadre of future employees for the conservation and climate change space.

The chief executive officer of AmeriCorps, Michael Smith, and the Forest Service chief, Randy Moore, will sign that agreement this Friday.<sup>2</sup> We're thrilled to see that get rolling, and hope Jake's point about scale is one that we're consciously aware of. We're going to start small, try to get it right, iron out a couple of kinks, and then cross our fingers that there is an opportunity for us to scale further down the line. So, the AmeriCorps NCCC Forest Corps becomes official this Friday and recruitment for members opens the same day.

**Marianne Lavelle:** Rola and Jake, can either of you talk about other sectors in which you see young people getting involved and making a difference while training on climate?

**Rola Halawanji:** One misconception is that once you get into the field, you just stick with one thing. The truth is that everything is interrelated. Getting into urban greening might lead to agroecology or sustainable agriculture. Going into organic waste and food recovery may lead to circular economy waste management.

There isn't one solution, but in some of the sectors we see we need everyone, not just young folks, to be more mindful and aware of their personal impact. It doesn't take a full-on training or a full-on fellowship. For those who choose to immerse themselves into these different sectors, it's one of those things that, when you get in, you think that you come in with some knowledge. But you end up gaining so much more knowledge.

All this is to say that the climate field is vast and the sectors, the areas of focus that we offer, are entry points. We eagerly are witnessing a lot of our fellows diving into other branches of what those areas of focus could afford.

Another sector that needs a lot of growth is climate data analytics and modeling. It is very important to understand climate patterns to predict climate-related events, and also to make data-based decisions and effective strategies. Young personnel with expertise in data analytics can really contribute to climate modeling, assessment, decisionmaking processes, and informed policies at the state level.

Another sector where we see young people working on climate and making a difference is environmental education and advocacy. A lot of our fellows engage in climate actions, environmental education, and climate volunteerism, which is a focal point of this fellowship program. What distinguishes it from other programs is empowering communities to take actions within their communities through those volunteer events. Our fellows are working for and hosted by nonprofit organizations, local governments, and grassroots organizations that are deeply ingrained in the communities that they are serving.

Having professionals come in, preferably hiring within the communities, where they can actually make an impact in the communities where they grew up or where they already have roots really makes a difference. Working with organizations that are within their communities and seeing the fruits of their efforts, seeing the direct impact that they're having, is a form of advocacy.

In our social media and digital world, there are other effective tools for raising awareness and mobilizing support for climate action as well. Those are the sectors that come to mind.

**Jake Pollack:** Rola, I appreciated you starting on how in the climate field you can go a mile wide and an inch deep. You can learn about so many different sectors and how they interconnect.

I'll add a couple more. We certainly have seen data analysis, advocacy, and education as key elements in a lot of our fellows' scopes. What we're starting to see in California and other parts of the United States is a need from corporations to really dial in environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting and requirements. Especially scope 3 emissions due to recent legislation in California in particular,<sup>3</sup> but certainly nationwide. That is one place where fellows can have an outsized impact. Often those are small teams, but they can radically transform business and supply chains, all kinds of operations, toward more climate-friendly practices.

We also have seen a steady increase over the years, especially in the past couple of years with COVID, for kindergarten through grade 12 and higher education institutions and partners that we've had needing support in bridging gaps. First, in their facilities and operation, and having the resources and skilled folks to do work in the facilities and build the environment sector. We focus on bridging understanding. Say, for example, a solar and storage installation is built at a school or university. The fellow can make sure that the students have access to that as a learning resource. A campus as a living lab is the model for that.

We've seen fellows be incredibly successful in that kind of near-peer relationship. Maybe they're only a couple of years older or almost peers with the people they're working with, and thus they are able to show a real trajectory of going into a field—say, here's what a climate job can look like—to somebody who's just a few years away from

2. Press Release, AmeriCorps, Applications to Join New American Climate Corps Program, AmeriCorps NCCC Forest Corps, Now Open (Dec. 1, 2023), <https://americorps.gov/newsroom/press-release/applications-join-new-american-climate-corps-program-ameri-corps-nccc-forest>.

3. Climate Corporate Data Accountability Act, S.B. 253 (Cal. 2023).

pursuing something like that. We also tend to work with career counselors and create that pathway as clearly as we can for current students as well because of the education programs we run.

So, the education sector is a really important one. As I mentioned, we're hearing from schools across the board how under-resourced they are in multiple states. How they have degraded infrastructure and their built environment really needs support and upgrades with heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems or energy management, green operations, and the like. The built environment is a place where we see across the sectors an opportunity for us to continue to build this group.

For about eight years, we've had a real focus on either strategic energy management or green operations and maintenance in partnership with San Timoteo Energy Associates, and also in partnership with the Northwest Energy Efficiency Council, which runs the Building Operator Certification program, and with the U.S. Green Building Council, which provides the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification. What we've seen is that there's basically a "scaffold gap" between folks who want to work on facilities and those doing energy management work in that there aren't clear training or mentorship pathways from early career opportunities to more entry-level positions.

But for recent grads to get to entry-level positions, we're building those steps along the way. For example, we know that in Washington State, because of the green building performance standards,<sup>4</sup> they have this incredible need for a work force that can be responsive to those standards. At the same time, the folks who are doing that work are either retiring or don't have the resources and skills and need more training. So, this is really an interesting opportunity to bring folks into the climate field through buildings.

It's greenhouse gas emissions reduction, obviously, but it's also thinking creatively and strategically and in innovative ways about how to use the built-in environment effectively and to lower cost and lower energy use across the board. That's one of the ways that we're trying to be responsive to what sectors are demanding, by noting what we see in specific regions. Washington is by no means the only state doing that. Oregon recently copied Washington or tried to extend those green building performance standards.<sup>5</sup> We know this is happening in many states across the country as well.

We're excited about those pathways, where we see a real demand and also a future need. Such building performance standards are only going to become more increasingly stringent, as we've seen in California and other states that are leading and implementing aggressive policies year

after year.<sup>6</sup> So, that's also a way in which we are future-proofing the work, by ensuring that it's something ideally enshrined in policy. Something that's only going to continue to be a demand in the field.

**Marianne Lavelle:** The point that a lot of professionals in some of these fields are retiring just underscores the need. I know that's true in the Forest Service as well, where a group of really skilled folks are retiring. This is an opportunity for them to pass on their knowledge to the next generation that we don't want to let slip away. This is a program that can help do that.

I'm getting a lot of great questions. An audience member asked, could someone provide an overview of the Climate Corps program that has been announced? My understanding is that this is not just one agency but many federal agencies participating, through using the programs that the U.S. Congress has already approved to act on climate and act on infrastructure. So it's not just one place. It's all across the federal government. Ken, why don't you give us an overview so that people who are interested in getting involved know how to do that?

**Ken Goodson:** There is a fact sheet on American Climate Corps.<sup>7</sup> The president on September 20 announced the launch of American Climate Corps. I think what Jake, Rola, and I represent are programs that helped get to the point that an announcement for an American Climate Corps was made, that has been foundational work that brought us to the point that there was the ability to make that type of announcement.

Now, here we are two months later. I would offer that a lot of the details on execution, how this is going to work, and what it's going to look like are still being formulated as we move forward. You made a point, Marianne, about multiple agencies having a role. The work AmeriCorps NCCC is doing on Forest Corps is one part of what could be a broader relationship with the Forest Service. To get the Forest Corps set up, there is anticipation and aspiration that is broader and bigger than that.

I will also offer that opportunities coming out at the local level and at the regional level is very much the hope. As far as how you can get engaged or find out more information, one of the best resources in the AmeriCorps universe is what's called a state service commission. That's who administers the AmeriCorps program at the state level. They're also just wonderful human beings who are subject matter experts on how to navigate AmeriCorps and how that works. So, that's a great place to start and to look for

4. Washington State Department of Commerce, *Clean Buildings Performance Standard*, <https://www.commerce.wa.gov/growing-the-economy/energy/buildings/clean-buildings-standards/> (last visited Feb. 7, 2024).

5. Oregon Department of Energy, *Building Energy Performance Standards*, <https://www.oregon.gov/energy/save-energy/Pages/BPS.aspx> (last visited Feb. 7, 2024).

6. Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, Department of Energy, *History and Impacts*, <https://www.energy.gov/eere/buildings/history-and-impacts> (last visited Feb. 7, 2024) ("The first [energy efficiency] standards were enacted at the state level in California in 1974.").

7. Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Launches American Climate Corps to Train Young People in Clean Energy, Conservation, and Climate Resilience Skills, Create Good-Paying Jobs and Tackle the Climate Crisis, *supra* note 1.

information as this gets built up.<sup>8</sup> Also, there is a sign-up place for people to receive information and stay informed as details are further fleshed out.<sup>9</sup>

**Marianne Lavelle:** One of the things I want to ask is what you're doing to make sure that environmental justice is prioritized in this program. This was a priority the president announced from the beginning.

**Ken Goodson:** It is very intentionally the hope. We know that the impacts of climate change are not experienced equally across all residents of the United States. So the hope for the American Climate Corps, and climate programming in general for AmeriCorps, is increasingly targeted to those who experience the highest burdens of poverty and racial inequity.

There are a couple specific things that accompany that. For those of you who track the AmeriCorps universe, you're familiar with the fact that there have been really concerted efforts over the past few years to increase living allowances for members to make sure that more Americans are able to serve their nation and able to participate in these programs. You will see that the American Climate Corps' aspiration is continuing to build on that momentum so that the young adults who might find themselves serving in climate programs in the future continue to find fewer barriers when they're looking to apply to be part of these programs.

I'll speak again to the small world that I live in at AmeriCorps NCCC. We do not have an education requirement. We do not have a prior-skills requirement. We cover all costs of program participation, from transportation to lodging, and everything else. We get the barriers to participation out of the way so that there are more opportunities for young adults to participate. Then, we partner with organizations that can provide some of the technical training and skill development so that the young adults are positioned to be successful.

The fact that the Forest Service is losing some skill and knowledge with some of the employees who may be soon retiring is an important opportunity for us. How can we get young adults in their formative years to have access to that type of training, and then get the hands-on experience and find themselves in the position to be competitive for future employment?

**Marianne Lavelle:** Ken also spoke to one of the other audience questions, which is, what are you doing to recruit young people from disadvantaged communities and people not pursuing the four-year college path? It sounds like that's very much front of mind. Rola, how do you find environmental justice working as part of what you are doing in the Bay Area?

**Rola Halawanji:** I want to clarify that CCAC is offered throughout the state. We have partnerships from Butte and northern counties all the way down to San Diego and even along the border of California and Mexico.

This is a question that we always ask ourselves. The approach that we've taken to prioritize environmental justice is to start with our internal team and prioritize the diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) work. Our team underwent and is still going through a series of DEIB workshops in order for us to understand how this will translate into the programmatic components and how we can best provide or serve the members and the fellows that are applying to our program.

I think our biggest priority is equitable program access. As Ken mentioned, there are barriers to participating in an AmeriCorps program. Not everyone has the financial support to be in an AmeriCorps program. We have made a push to recruit from Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) groups, to advocate for stipend increases, and to provide additional benefits. We're still trying to figure out ways to tackle the housing crisis in California. You are all probably aware that no matter which part of California you're serving in, housing is an issue. We don't provide housing vouchers, but we are always looking for collaborative opportunities to be able to provide those supportive services so the fellows can have a great member experience and not worry whether or not they will be able to have dinner or have a meal the next day.

So, we are looking at those different facets of accessibility. We want to actively engage underrepresented groups so that, when they are working within their communities, they can engage in tailored solutions to vulnerable communities and work on projects and initiatives that specifically address those local environmental concerns in vulnerable and marginalized communities. We hope that through the work that we are doing internally, and as it translates into the program, we are able to empower community members to actively participate in climate action and also the decisionmaking process.

We also offer two very exciting types of training. Jake touched on the trauma-aware training through University of California Climate Stewards. This is an exciting partnership where we are combining the science of climate change with the social and emotional resilience and trauma-aware practices, which in turn will help the fellows to empower their communities and to really understand the dynamics of their local communities.

Another course we are offering is called Bridging Differences. This is more focused on the soft skills than the hard skills. This is a bridge builder program that closes the psychological gaps between "us" and "them." We want our fellows to work with empathy and understanding. We want our fellows to really start embracing the values of being conscious and aware of how they are engaging communities, and how they are engaging with one another.

With the climate change problem, it's not one group that's affected, but everyone. We have to find ways for us to come together to develop solutions that make sense within local communities. In gist, we're doing a lot of DEIB work.

8. AmeriCorps, *State Service Commissions*, <https://americorps.gov/contact/state-service-commissions> (last visited Feb. 7, 2024).

9. White House, *American Climate Corps*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/climatecorps/> (last visited Feb. 7, 2024).

We are offering training that also promotes those values, coming from an understanding and an empathy perspective as well as ensuring that we are able to break down some of those barriers to access to AmeriCorps programs.

**Marianne Lavelle:** What Rola has said is interesting because it shows that being involved in Climate Corps isn't just about clearing the forest of hazardous fuels. It's also about being in a community together addressing this large crisis and understanding the human impact. Really, the empathy part is something we all need as we're approaching these impacts of climate change.

**Jake Pollack:** Both of what Ken and Rola shared are similar to things that we've been thinking about and are continuing to improve upon. Marianne, as for what you just said in terms of the empathy piece and being in a community, we saw this a lot during the pandemic, with mutual aid and fellows volunteering their time at food banks, for example. I do think there is a spirit of communal connection, like you're describing, almost built into these programs, but certainly one that we think about cultivating to give fellows the space and the time to do those types of actions.

Because we're a nonprofit, we have flexibility to make the program accessible to a large audience with increased stipends and wages and benefits. I mentioned before about being creative and scrappy. We bring funding pretty regularly and pretty successfully in new regions, bringing in philanthropy funding and support where we can to make it more accessible to a broad range of fellows coming into the program. Then we work with the private sector, as those wage levels have to be competitive within the sector.

We're able to have a sliding scale and approach both for the fellows to get a different wage range depending on the skills and the scope that they bring to it and what's required in the position. Also, what we try to think about, along with a sliding scale, is that no potential fellow be turned away for lack of funds. So, when we're building programs in a new region or for a specific funding opportunity, like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for example, we think about our partners in the corporate sector who have more resources available to support the public sector where there may not be the same level of resources. We're creatively, directly, and transparently telling our partners what we expect and anticipate the cost share to look like. That is also a key dimension of equity in thinking about environmental justice.

Another thing we're able to do in new regions, and has been really successful in Oregon with that kind of braided funding model, is to not just prioritize but almost solely work with BIPOC-led organizations, in part because of the funding that we had available for that work and in part because we wanted to commit to that. That was what was needed in the region—to add capacity specifically around energy and equity, and we've done that cohort for multiple years now because of philanthropic support and, in particular, foundation support.

That's been really exciting. And similarly, on the East Coast, we work with historically Black colleges and universities, where we have an emphasis on supporting those communities with fellows in higher education and showing them career trajectories into these sectors where they are underrepresented.

That is definitely a commitment that we have as an organization, to add capacity where it's needed, and to focus on underrepresented groups in the field, in particular. As Rola spoke to, doing a sort of internal tuning up and learning as an organization, we're thinking about how we track demographics effectively over time, and what our recruitment practices are because we are a co-supervisor with our partners. We really think about it, and we've learned from groups like Elemental Excelsior, for example, who provide wraparound services to the folks they work with around microaggressions, around workplace dimensions, things we could be learning together about the fellow's experience. How can we also transform potentially, in some ways, the place where they're working and the experience of their day-to-day scope?

We think about how we can extend out some of these changes that we're learning about internally as an organization with our partners, and even to the point where we're thinking about having commitments from our partners and being selective around who we work with, also, similarly having a commitment to DEIB and environmental justice.

Those are some ways, because we have flexibility with our funding mechanisms and who we work with and can be selective, that we've been really successful on the recruitment side to change the way that we're thinking about bringing in folks directly from the communities that they're working in. One recent example in the Pacific Northwest is the federal funding that supported some of our work with tribes and fellows in tribes, which required the fellows to be registered tribal citizens. And so, we're able to be effective in recruiting from that community for those roles, which we're excited about. It was something that built that partnership and allowed it to persist year after year. We look for those concentric circles of impact, too, with our partners.

**Marianne Lavelle:** One of the audience members asked about what's being done to work with Indigenous communities. It sounds like you're already doing that sort of work, Jake? I think the U.S. Department of the Interior also is going to be a part of this larger federal program, so again there are lots of opportunities there.

The audience is asking some really nuts-and-bolts questions. Another question is, are the members of the Climate Corps compensated? And if so, how much?

**Ken Goodson:** I can talk a bit about AmeriCorps programming and how stipends are done. I will refer back to the previous comment that these are things that we are, across AmeriCorps, moving in an upward direction. Most of the way that the agency works, organizations receive grant funding from AmeriCorps, and then they admin-

ister their program as they see fit within our guidelines. The agency has moved in the direction of increasing the minimum living allowance that members receive, and then different programs have the ability to increase beyond that minimum by  $x$  amount or offer something like a housing supplement, for example. So, it can look a little different across the country.

What you see with American Climate Corps is an aspirational move toward a level of \$15 per hour compensation for members, and then again, speaking to the world that I live in for the NCCC Forest Corps, that will be a \$15-per-hour equivalent. But our program model is a little different from some of the grant-funded AmeriCorps programs in that we provide housing and transportation. We take care of all of the expenses that, for another program, the individual member may have to assume responsibility. The aspirational target is to get toward \$15. That, of course, requires congressional support.

**Marianne Lavelle:** I remember reading that was what the Forest Service was hoping to do. It makes sense because a lot of the places where they work are very remote. And one of the problems in getting the personnel is getting people out there to where the need is. So the housing, and the like, is very crucial.

**Ken Goodson:** I'll pause on that point because I think you hit on something. I see in national service that housing has always been challenging—particularly when you think about housing in some of the communities or locations that perhaps have the highest need for the type of support that AmeriCorps resources can help mobilize. And that is only growing more difficult. The housing challenge is very real, and we're going to have to look at some different solutions, public-private partnerships and other things, as we think creatively about how to address that.

**Marianne Lavelle:** Rola mentioned housing in California as well. It shows how intersectional this whole thing is. What requirements are there for young people to be considered for such programs? Do they need to have a high school degree? What are you looking for with these programs?

**Jake Pollack:** We likely have some of the broadest range of scopes and partnerships. We do have fellows coming in as recent graduates, typically from two- and four-year degree programs. But in some of our programs, we're waiving those requirements because as long as they have the commitment, the interest, and really the capacity to do the work, that's actually what matters most in terms of getting the work done. And the supports that we provide through the cohort and the training we assume will also prepare them for the sector-specific knowledge that they need.

So, we have, over the years, done a significant rethink around what it is that these scopes actually need. A different end of the spectrum, in terms of working with a utility or in a strategic energy management type of a role, is having one to two years' experience or even a degree,

sometimes an advanced degree, which actually makes a significant difference for the scope and for them to hit the ground running. We take it case by case, really, guided by what the partner is telling us they need in the scope. We also want to make sure that the fellow is set up for success, so we're not placing someone who doesn't have the minimum requirements. We want to make sure that they're able, within the first couple of months, to settle in and really understand the scope. But then, to start moving with it pretty quickly as well.

We do a lot of vetting. We do careful analysis and make sure it's both a good fit for the site and for the fellow, and also a good fit for the fellow when they're thinking about what their career trajectory is. That it is a natural next step, which may be a challenge for them but they're still up for that challenge and ready for that type of commitment.

**Marianne Lavelle:** Ken, when we talk about forests, we talk about the need for hazardous fuels management. One of the audience questions is, will the Forest Corps members also be working on things like tree planting for carbon sequestration and that sort of thing?

**Ken Goodson:** Let me start by pivoting back to the question that you had posed, Jake. For the NCCC Forest Corps, there is no educational requirement. It's 18 to 26, full stop. That's part of the aspiration of continuing to remove and reduce barriers to participation.

For the Forest Corps, there are two primary guiding documents that the Forest Service is using for determining the type of work that the members will do. One is the wildfire mitigation strategy.<sup>10</sup> The other is the reforestation strategy that the Forest Service has in place.<sup>11</sup> The goal is for members to be involved in work that has a bit of both of those going on. So, yes, there is a desire, at least as we get started, to see members not only involved in the fire mitigation work, but to be involved in the reforestation efforts as well.

I mentioned earlier that recruitment for members opens this Friday. The identification of service locations by the Forest Service is also ongoing and underway right now. The first cohort will arrive for training in June and start their service commitments in the beginning of July. So, we have a bit of lead time between now and July to see how the Forest Service actually goes about identifying the priorities, but it's around those two main guiding documents: their wildfire mitigation strategy and their reforestation strategy.

**Marianne Lavelle:** One audience member asks, is there demographic data? I'm not sure that there is yet because the federal program is so new. Rola, what do you see as far as diversity in the California program? What are the

10. Forest Service, *Confronting the Wildfire Crisis*, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/wildfire-crisis> (last visited Feb. 7, 2024).

11. FOREST SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM REFORESTATION STRATEGY: GROWING AND NURTURING RESILIENT FORESTS (2022), <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/reforestation-strategy.pdf>.



demographics, the age range? What parts of the state? Urban? Rural?

**Rola Halawanji:** I first want to go back to the question of stipends and provide information on that as well. CCAC has reached the ceiling on the annual stipend that a fellow can get, and that's \$33,000 per year for about 11 months of commitment in the fellowship. That's around 1,700 hours. If you do the math, the hourly rate is higher than the minimum wage, which is a great accomplishment and achievement for AmeriCorps programs, especially in California where we know that the living wage is not sufficient. As much as we push for it, it's still not sufficient in the state.

And at the end of their 1,700-hour commitment, the fellows also get an educational award. We are grateful that the state of California offers what they call the California for All Education Award, in addition to the Segal Education Award that is offered through AmeriCorps. Combined, the educational award amounts to \$10,000, which is a great motivator and a great addition to the living stipend that our fellows get.

We try to provide added benefits to support the fellow throughout the fellowship, to ensure that he or she has a successful member experience. That comes mainly in the form of professional development, where we put in a lot of resources to provide the best training we can provide, and also partner with certifying organizations to ensure that our fellows are getting certifications while serving in CCAC.

Going back to your question about the demographics of the program, the majority of our members are between 25 and 35 years of age. Many of our members have graduated from college and are looking for ways to get into the climate sectors. AmeriCorps programs are a great segue for fresh-out-of-college students that want to explore and figure out what they want to do. We always hope that CCAC actually serves as a catalyst. That's my personal mission, as education has served as a catalyst for me. We hope that CCAC is that catalyst for a lot of our fellows, or that they use the fellowship as a launch pad into the sector.

We also have participants who are transitioning careers. An AmeriCorps fellowship and CCAC is another avenue for mid-career transitions, again, to see what the sector looks like, and what type of work they will be doing. It serves as an opportunity to test-drive, if you will, what a career in the climate sector would look like and how that would impact that person individually. Working in this sector is hard. It's draining emotionally, mentally, and intellectually, and it's necessary to know how to embed self-care techniques to be able to better serve the communities and to be able to provide the best version of yourself in this sector. It's very important to see if this is for you or not.

We also have members that are retired and want to give back. They feel that the climate crisis is urgent, and they want to leave behind a legacy and pave the way for future generations to enjoy the things that we take for granted in our environment.

I want to say the majority of the age group, of members out of college, is about 80%. This is our largest full-term

program to date. The full term is the 11-month fellowship. We have more than 300 participants. We are seeing a lot more diversity in this term. I think this is a result of our team actively recruiting from nontraditional, marginalized, and BIPOC groups to ensure that the work that is being done by our members is representative of the communities that they are serving.

As to requirements to entry, there are AmeriCorps requirements that we cannot avoid. We are funded by AmeriCorps through California Volunteers, and the requirements include being a U.S. resident or a U.S. citizen. That's one of the hard qualifications to be able to participate in an AmeriCorps program. Also, we perform background checks. For program-specific requirements, as Jake mentioned, we're looking for a passion for wanting to be in this sector and some related experience. We don't want to increase the barriers to access by adding a college degree or by adding any kind of educational qualification in order to be part of the program.

**Marianne Lavelle:** I want to make sure to get to the practical questions. I love this one because it shows a lot of our audience members are from government agencies and/or working at the state and local levels. One person asked, are there studies that show the positive benefits of these programs to states, to help us pitch these programs to our states that have been less engaged in this? How do we make the pitch for our state that this is really beneficial?

Ken mentioned the amazing statistic about the pipeline to FEMA from the AmeriCorps program and how successful that has been. Is there anything else you can point people to with a mind to how they can interest their policymakers in getting involved?

**Ken Goodson:** For AmeriCorps, we have what's called the Evidence Exchange,<sup>12</sup> by which the agency's Office of Research and Evaluation works with independent researchers to assess the impact of AmeriCorps in a variety of levels both on individual development for members and community impact. I find that to be a wonderful place to at least start. Then, I'll go back to the state service commissions, which will oftentimes have a much more localized view of such research and data.

**Marianne Lavelle:** Any advice for state agencies that are looking to take part in the program?

**Jake Pollack:** Just yesterday, I was approached by the consulting firm ICF about basically a return on investment (ROI) study on Climate Corps-type programs, AmeriCorps, and beyond. And they provided an example of one that I think was done in Montana recently.<sup>13</sup> So, I'm just starting to see some of these studies emerge and some of

12. AmeriCorps, *Evidence Exchange*, <https://americorps.gov/about/our-impact/evidence-exchange> (last visited Jan. 23, 2024).

13. AmeriCorps, *Return on Investment Study: Montana Conservation Corps*, <https://www.americorps.gov/evidence-exchange/return-investment-study-montana-conservation-corps> (last visited Feb. 7, 2024).

the analysis done by respected consultants like ICF in the field. As Ken mentioned, there's a lot of reporting required from AmeriCorps programs, so I think there's probably a healthy data set.

One of the things that caught my attention in the ICF request, in particular, was not just the ROI that we think of in terms of financial payback, but also in terms of social impact. I haven't seen those studies as much, but I am excited to see that starting to be taken into account. For us, the key number that we typically share is that about 85% of our fellows are either hired on into their position or continue in the same trajectory in their sector that they worked in—water, energy, waste, and so on—or they go back to graduate school.

That's a metric that we often point to that's pretty consistent year after year. But as I mentioned before, we are trying to get a better sense of longitudinal data for not just where the fellows are a year or two after, but five, 10, 15 years after the program. That's some impact data that we're trying to start to both gather and then make sense of.

**Marianne Lavelle:** What should government agencies or local nonprofits be doing right now to get involved? Ken, what do you advise for them to make a connection with this program?

**Ken Goodson:** Again, there is a way to sign up to get updates and have information about what's going on at the national level, as the White House looks to convene these different federal agencies and get this effort moving.<sup>14</sup> I think tracking at the macrolevel, at how the American Climate Corps is coming together, what are the updates, what are the different pieces that start to firm up and get announced, and then get rolled out. I would encourage tracking that and signing up through the website.

I also think engaging at the state and regional levels is going to be equally valuable. When I was talking earlier about how AmeriCorps NCCC moved into the space, it was initially through state partnerships and then through regional partnerships with federal agencies. I think making those connections while at the same time tracking the national landscape will be key.

I'll make another plug for the state service commissions because they can help somebody go from trying to search all of the individual organizations that are doing wonder-

ful work at the local level to being able to give concrete examples, make introductions, and get things rolling.

**Marianne Lavelle:** Thank you for all of those resources. This question may be a good way to wrap up. One of the audience members notes, in addition to addressing the needs of disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, which is great, that there's also a need to reach people who are spending the most money or generating the most greenhouse gases. In a way, these members of the Climate Corps could be ambassadors, getting the word out or influencing other people at their colleges, in their communities, on how important it is to take climate into account in really everything we're doing in society.

Are you finding that the students and young people that you're working with take this message out, not just that they're getting jobs for themselves, but want to continue to make a difference on the climate?

**Rola Halawanji:** Some of the collective climate impacts that our fellows—a cohort of about 115 members—have contributed to from October 2022 to August 2023 include diverting 28 million pounds of food and organic waste; planting and donating about 10,000 trees, and maintaining 75,000 trees; and educating about 6,500 people, and engaging 65,000 people throughout the state. And we've seen about 47,000 volunteer hours just in that one year.

We're very proud of this data, which we collect to actually show the collective impact that our members are having on the ground, working with their host partner and our partner organizations. We want to amplify their voices. We want to share that this program, as Ken mentioned regarding mobilizing at the ground level, is a bottom-to-top approach by really showcasing the impact and the successes of these fellows.

We want this message to be heard loud and clear, and not only by local government or state government or federal government, but also by every type of business—corporate, nonprofit, for-profit, and so on. It really shows the power of collective action and what can be accomplished with a cohort of 115 members. We are really looking forward to seeing our current cohort, which has tripled in numbers, and what impact they will have throughout the state.

**Marianne Lavelle:** It's a great note to end on, the successes.

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14. White House, *supra* note 9.