

WHAT ARE AMERICORPS “VOLUNTEERS” REALLY DOING?

In recent months, discussion over funding for AmeriCorps has often centered on the good work that AmeriCorps participants are performing. While, some of the activities undertaken by AmeriCorps “volunteers” may be of service to local communities, AmeriCorps participants are also engaging in some very questionable activities. Here are just a few examples:

- AmeriCorps advocates recently highlighted that AmeriCorps participants recently painted a 76-year-old woman’s house in South Buffalo, New York — traditionally groups such as the Boy Scouts, civic clubs and churches, not federally paid “volunteers” have undertaken this type of community service;
- AmeriCorps participants have been placed at the Prevention Works! program, which among other things operates a needle exchange providing needles for individuals to inject illegal drugs — this highly controversial program is receiving assistance from federally paid “volunteers”;
- AmeriCorps participants have been placed at the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League, whose mission is to provide “direct services to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth in the metropolitan DC area” — while the government generally does not fund projects targeted at individuals solely because of their sexual orientation, in this instance, federally paid “volunteers” are working for this controversial program;
- Many AmeriCorps participants are engaged in helping students learn to read and in after-school tutoring programs, yet in some instances these federally paid “volunteers” have dropped out of high school;
- In the past, AmeriCorps participants have been found building mud ovens, working at McDonald’s, babysitting, participating in political rallies, putting on puppet shows, and sewing a quilt – all the while being paid by taxpayers.

Absent fundamental reform of AmeriCorps, additional funding will be used to fund not just the worthy programs touted by AmeriCorps advocates, but also the questionable programs outlined above.

THE SAVE AMERICORPS COALITION: MISGUIDED PRIORITIES OF NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS?

What is the “Save AmeriCorps” Coalition? --The Save AmeriCorps Coalition is an organization started by a variety of non-profits who in the past have benefited from AmeriCorps by receiving funds and volunteers. While these non-profits argue that they will not be able to continue their mission without additional money for AmeriCorps (money that would make up shortfalls caused by AmeriCorps own accounting and management failures), they are spending thousands of dollars and exerting hundreds of man-hours on the “Save AmeriCorps” lobbying campaign. These non-profits also often neglect to mention that the AmeriCorps program, in addition to providing taxpayer-paid “volunteers,” also help subsidize their organizations’ overhead and operating expenses.

This week, the Save AmeriCorps Coalition is holding an event to lobby for additional funding for AmeriCorps. The cost of this event according to the *Washington Post* is \$250,000. To put this money in context, consider the following facts:

- \$250,000 would pay for 53 education awards of \$4,725 for AmeriCorps members;
- \$250,000 is nearly the amount that Citizen Schools Inc., one of the organizations involved in the Coalition, received from AmeriCorps in national direct funding in FY 2002; and
- \$250,000 is nearly the amount that We Care America, another Coalition organization, was approved for in FY 2003, allowing them to hire 20 full time equivalent AmeriCorps participants.

Estimates of the additional cost of the activities of the Save AmeriCorps Coalition, including numerous newspaper advertisements, a website, and various media events are unavailable.