



AmeriCorps Planning Grant 2022-23 Needs Assessment and Report

This is a report on the needs assessment conducted as part of the 2022-23 AmeriCorps planning grant awarded to Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, The Montana Coalition, Inc. (HMHB). With this grant, HMHB has explored the possibility of developing a “LIFTS Corps” of AmeriCorps State members that would tie in with HMHB’s Linking Infants & Families to Supports (LIFTS) online resource guide and improve and expand services to pregnant and parenting families with children age zero to three. Due to a transition of organizational leadership and other factors, HMHB decided we would discontinue the planning process and would not to apply for an operating grant at this time. This report addresses HMHB’s planning experience, including the needs assessment.

Summary of Needs Assessment

During the needs assessment process, HMHB attended trainings and meetings offered by the Montana Office of Community Service, reviewed various reports and written materials, surveyed 27 stakeholders, and held meetings and interviews with over 30 stakeholders. Details about these processes are set forth below. HMHB’s main conclusions from the needs assessment are:

- Pregnant and parenting families in Montana, and the people and organizations that serve them, have needs that AmeriCorps members could assist with, including but not limited to improving and expanding referrals to community services; enhancing child development screening and referral processes; conducting both targeted and general outreach; assisting with community- and issue-specific needs assessments; strengthening family engagement efforts; supporting and replicating doula programs; creating organizational materials and protocols; and developing volunteer recruitment and coordination programs for in-home assistance to families and other activities.
- The interest in hosting AmeriCorps members is high enough that a viable program with at least five member service year (MSY) equivalents could likely be designed, but some potential sites may need assistance with cost share or match funding in the initial years.
- Recruitment would be a major challenge in light of the lack of affordable housing, so the prioritized strategy would be to focus on people who already live in Montana such as college students, recent graduates, current community residents and, in some circumstances, sober living program participants.

Materials Review

Among other resources, HMHB reviewed the following materials in assessing needs:

- The Montana State Health Assessment and State Health Improvement Plan 2019-2023;
- Montana Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS) data;



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- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Pregnancy-Related Deaths: Data from Maternal Mortality Review Committees in 36 US States, 2017-2019
- Selected Community Health (Needs) Assessments and (Community Health) Improvement Plans, or (CH)IP/CH(N)As from communities across Montana;
- Montana Obstetrics and Maternal Support (MOMS) research team at The University of Montana, Maternal Health in Montana: Full Report (May 2022)
- The Montana Children’s Health Data Dashboard;
- Montana State University Area Health Education Center, Montana Paraprofessionals Workforce Report With a Spotlight on Integration (January 2022)
- Scott Grauspensberger et. al, Associations Between Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Smoking and Alcohol Use Behaviors in a Large Statewide Sample, Journal of Community Health (2023).
- The Montana Institute and The University of Washington, Health Outcomes from Positive Experiences: Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Substance Use (2022)
- Kirsten Smith, Montana's Early Childhood System: A Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (Sept. 2019)
- Montana Office of Head Start, Program Information Report – Summary Report – State Level (2022)
- Bedaso, A., Adams, J., Peng, W., & Sibbritt, D., The relationship between social support and mental health problems during pregnancy: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Reproductive Health, 18(1), 1-23 (2021).
- The Montana ENHANCE: Essential Childcare Needs COVID-19 and Beyond summary and full results reports;
- Parenting Montana’s 2021 Montana Parent Key Finding Report;
- Katie Loveland, “Temporary Workers to Build Capacity in Montana Public Health Departments,” a resource guide provided to the Montana Public Health Institute (May 10, 2022)
- HMHB, LIFTS in Indian Country Project Report (October 12, 2022);
- Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance and March of Dimes, Perinatal Mental Health and Education Project, Phase I Final report
- Casey Family Programs, Issue Brief, “Do Place-Based Programs, such as Family Resource Centers, Reduce Risk of Child Maltreatment and Entry into Foster Care?”(June 19, 2019)
- SchoolHouse Connection, “Infants and Toddlers Experiencing Homelessness” (November 2022)
- Rebecca Britt and Joy Burkhard, “U.S. Maternal Depression Screening Rates Released for the First Time Through HEDIS [Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set]” (November 14, 2022)

Relevant data gleaned from these materials includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- The #1 underlying cause of pregnancy-related death in the United States is mental health conditions, meaning suicide and overdose combined. [CDC]



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- Maternal depression in Montana is higher than national estimates at 27%, and perinatal depression is more common among mothers who are American Indian, are younger, have less education, are publicly insured, and have lower income. [PRAMS Data Brief, Maternal Mental Health in Montana, 2017-2020]
- People who report having had the highest levels of positive childhood experiences are, as adults, 68% less likely to smoke cigarettes and 71% less likely to have used illicit drugs, while those with the lowest levels of positive childhood experiences reported 25-26% more binge drinking incidents. [Montana Institute]
- There is a need, voiced by community stakeholders, to connect Native American families with cultural traditions and approaches to pregnancy, birth, and parenting. [HMHB]
- Low social support has significant associations with the risk of depression, anxiety, and self-harm during pregnancy. [Bedaso]

Stakeholder survey

HMHB conducted a stakeholder survey, which it promoted at its annual Perinatal Mental Health Conference, through its organizational newsletter, and on its Facebook page. There were 27 respondents. HMHB believes, based on the timing of responses, that most respondents were attendees at HMHB's Perinatal Mental Health conference. The results, with questions and responses including identifying information redacted, are submitted along with this report. Key takeaways include:

- 74% of respondents selected in-home assistance with chores, meals, and caregiving breaks as one of the best activities to address unmet or under-resourced needs of pregnant and parenting families with children age zero to three, and 70% identified social supports such as peer groups and mentoring programs.
- Family engagement and trust-building activities with families was the most commonly selected intervention that respondents believed AmeriCorps members could assist with (33%), followed closely by fundraising and/or grant-writing, outreach such as "tabling," parenting education, and tracking and updating community resources and services (29% each).
- 70% of respondents stated the lack of available housing would be the biggest challenge an AmeriCorps member would face.
- 25% of respondents said that, as an employer, they believed training on trauma-informed approaches would be helpful in terms of development for AmeriCorps members as they transition to the workforce, followed by 18% identifying training on adverse and positive childhood experiences.

Meetings and Interviews

HMHB also conducted meetings and interviews with over 30 stakeholders, including potential host site organizations, academic and training professionals, other AmeriCorps programs, and local early childhood coalitions. Potential host sites included nonprofit hospitals, public health departments, and nonprofits serving pregnant and parenting families.



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Potential service activities

Stakeholders identified a variety of potential service activities, including:

- Recruiting and coordinating volunteers for in-home assistance programs, family engagement activities, and family-friendly events, potentially as a cross-stream initiative with an AmeriCorps Seniors program referring volunteers to a program built by the AmeriCorps State member;
- Collecting stories, particularly in relation to organizational projects and initiatives;
- Coordinating and promoting child development screening and referrals to and from Part C programs, which connect families with therapists and other services to address delays and disabilities in young children;
- Providing respite or additional child care to supplement existing child care staff who are attending trainings or doing other activities;
- Assisting with and/or coordinating local early childhood coalition activities and events;
- Outreach to the general public and to specific target audiences, such as medical providers;
- Grant-writing and/or fundraising;
- Expanding and/or replicating community doula programs;
- Adapting community health worker training programs for particular communities and/or in relation to maternal-child health and/or early childhood modules;
- Conducting or assisting with community- or issue-specific needs assessments;
- Developing organizational processes and manuals for staff to use in relation to using vetted perinatal mental health resource guides, resource navigation and referrals, identifying substance use disorders among families and appropriate responses, and other activities; and
- Supporting parenting education activities, coordinating calendars and registrations, and organizing one-off parenting classes or events, with some sites stating they have staff to conduct parenting education classes, but could use supports in coordination.

Challenges

Stakeholders also identified challenges associated with launching an AmeriCorps program and/or hosting an AmeriCorps member, as follows.

- Job market: Some stakeholders stated they were having difficulty filling regular staff positions that pay well and have full benefits, so they were unsure how they could convince decision-makers at their organizations that it would be worthwhile to pursue hosting an AmeriCorps member who would receive a modest living allowance and few benefits.
- Unsuccessful prior AmeriCorps recruitment: Similarly, some stakeholders said they had tried unsuccessfully to host AmeriCorps members in recent years, and most cited the lack of affordable housing as the reason their positions were not filled.



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- Lack of capacity to supervise: Some potential host sites stated they are simply tapped out and would not have capacity to supervise any more people than they already do. COVID-19 took a major toll on these professionals, there has been significant turnover, and they are already asked to supervise students, interns, and others, in addition to their regular duties.
- Insufficient time to train for needed tasks: A few stakeholders said they felt they would be creating “busy work” for an AmeriCorps member, because there wouldn’t be enough time to train someone brand new to the field to do what is actually needed.

Recruitment Strategies – Focusing on People Already Living in Montana

Understanding that the lack of affordable housing has been a significant challenge for AmeriCorps recruitment nationwide and in Montana, HMHB explored ideas to recruit people already living in Montana, such as college students and recent graduates. Stakeholders from various academic and community health worker training programs and other entities offered the following input regarding recruitment and retention of people already living in Montana:

- Need for “Serve at Home” messaging: One stakeholder stated she was familiar with AmeriCorps, but was not aware that a person could serve in their own community. Her understanding was that AmeriCorps was like the Peace Corps, in that part of the opportunity was to experience another way of life, and she felt it would be worthwhile to promote a “serve at home” message.
- Student capacity to serve: Some professors had reservations about whether a student could simultaneously serve full-time as an AmeriCorps member, and were more interested in part-time opportunities and/or limited service terms (e.g., summer positions).
- Prior AmeriCorps programs involving students: Some professors recalled prior programs of Campus Compact that were focused on current students serving in AmeriCorps, such as a program for nursing students that ended years ago. There was some uncertainty about why the program ended or whether it could be revived, so that may be worth exploring.
- Alignment with social work practicum: Social work professors generally believed that AmeriCorps service could potentially align with their programs’ practicum requirements if certain conditions were met, with the caveat that some programs have a more clinical bent than others. There was a split on whether a full-time service commitment could work with academic schedules. At the very least, an AmeriCorps position would need to be flexible enough to allow students to attend classes during specific times during the day. It may also be more appropriate to recruit people who are in between the undergraduate and graduate levels.
- Student recruitment in classes or events: Academic programs were generally open to having an AmeriCorps program present to their students, with the caveat that this option is best toward the end of the spring semester. Some programs have opportunities such as online recruitment for practicum positions and tabling events, and



these would need to be explored individually and approved by the respective academic program.

- Online social work programs: The University of Montana offers online social work programs, and AmeriCorps service could potentially be a way for people in remote and rural communities who have bachelor's degrees to gain practical experience and an education award in preparation for entering a master's level program. The details of this idea would of course need to be fleshed out with the academic program and any potential host sites.
- Nursing rule prohibiting pay for clinical hours: Nursing professors referred to a rule prohibiting nursing students from receiving pay for their clinical hours, but some were also potentially open to requesting an exemption to the rule for AmeriCorps service. Nursing professors also noted that their academic programs have specific requirements for practical experience in relation to certain classes, which might be challenging to tie in with an AmeriCorps position.
- Sober living programs: Some stakeholders discussed the idea of recruiting people in sober living programs. Of course, this strategy would depend on the individual, the position, and any relevant host site requirements (e.g., a prohibition against anyone who has had a Child and Family Services Division case). That said, depending on the program design, it could be worth exploring coordination with sober living programs, which could assist with referring appropriate candidates to apply to serve and supporting anyone selected as a member during service.
- Community health worker programs: There are community health worker training programs in Montana, which require a site preceptor's oversight and involve training on several subjects that could potentially benefit AmeriCorps members, such as learning host site policies and procedures, making and preparing a presentation on a health-related topic, cultural safety, and trauma-informed approaches. That said, the federal funding supporting these training programs requires that the host site have a job available for the participant upon completion of the training. HMHB was hoping that CHW training could potentially be incorporated into AmeriCorps members' training, but doing this would likely require either a commitment from the host site to offer a CHW job upon completion of service or some sort of pooled employer program which has not been developed. That said, even if AmeriCorps members cannot themselves go through the CHW training, they could perhaps assist in designing or promoting CHW programs across the state, especially with respect to modules focused on perinatal or early childhood populations.

Possible program design

If HMHB had proceeded with an operating grant, we anticipated hosting a full-time Team Leader at HMHB and somewhere between five and twelve additional members, who could be part-time or full-time depending on host sites' needs and position duties. The Team Leader would assist with recruitment, member support (such as setting regular all-member meetings),



and coordination of statewide initiatives for members, such as days of service and updating/expanding community resource and events listings on the LIFTS online resource guide. HMHB would have preferred a Team Leader with AmeriCorps experience in Montana, as that could potentially assist in connecting with existing AmeriCorps programs.

The LIFTS Corps would have likely included both capacity building and direct service, depending on host site needs. Ideally, HMHB would have identified during the course of communications with sites some similar “trends” or tracks in the members’ duties, such as family engagement, resource navigation, volunteer coordination, materials development, outreach, and/or local coalition support. That way, HMHB could highlight opportunities for some members to collaborate as appropriate on similar efforts, such as developing written materials and protocols for their organizations or designing and promoting local coalition events and activities.

In addition to the individual host site needs mentioned above, HMHB would have likely explored the potential for integration with existing multi-site non-AmeriCorps programs. For example, one possible path would be to explore whether AmeriCorps members could assist with the MOMS Empaths program and its SBIRT protocol to provide universal screening and referrals for substance use during pregnancy. Another path would be to explore the potential for incorporation of AmeriCorps members within family resource centers.

The specific member duties and intervention dosages would have, in accordance with AmeriCorps requirements, been designed with relevant evidence bases in mind. HMHB reviewed information from the AmeriCorps Evidence Exchange and elsewhere about the following AmeriCorps State programs, which are focused on pregnant and/or parenting families, health issues in Montana, and/or screening and referral processes:

- Birth & Beyond, California
- Hushabye Nursery, Arizona
- Public Health Corps, Montana
- Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest, multistate including Montana
- Gain Opportunities to Achieve Lasting Success (GOALS), Michigan
- Great Families 2020, Indiana
- Learning Early Achieves Potential (LEAP), Minnesota
- Connections to Care, New York
- Parent Possible – Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), Colorado
- Child Welfare System Improvement, California
- Minnesota Reading Corps Pre-K program, Minnesota
- First 5 Service Corps, California
- Jumpstart, California



HMHB did not proceed far enough to design a program in line with evidence bases. That said, HMHB would have gleaned any similarities with other AmeriCorps programs, reviewed other evidence bases for specific interventions not addressed by these AmeriCorps programs, and consulted with the Office of Community Service to cultivate evidence-based and/or evidence-informed approaches and to ensure the proper dosage of AmeriCorps intervention(s).

Funding

While HMHB did not proceed far enough into the process to execute memoranda of understanding or secure match funding from potential host sites, HMHB anticipated that there likely would have been a need for at least some sites to secure financial assistance with cost share/match funding. To be clear, some potential sites indicated that they had sufficient funding for cost share/match, but others stated it would be a challenge for them. Had HMHB proceeded, we would have engaged potential funders in conversations about whether and how they could potentially assist with match funding, either on a site-specific basis or program-wide, at least in the initial years of the program. In this respect, HMHB would have focused particularly on the needs of sites in communities that are typically under-resourced.

Infrastructure

In order to operate an AmeriCorps State program, HMHB would have needed to ensure that its organizational infrastructure was sufficient. Launching an AmeriCorps program is a significant undertaking requiring buy-in from organizational leadership, human resources, fiscal professionals, and programmatic staff. HMHB retained Jerry Bertrand of Public Impact Advisors, an expert on fiscal operations and federal grants compliance who presented a training to Montana's AmeriCorps State grantees in August 2022, to consult about HMHB's operations, and has benefited from that consultation.

HMHB recognizes the need for any organization implementing an AmeriCorps program to establish that it has the capacity to administer an AmeriCorps grant and matching funds, run payroll for members, maintain member files, conduct national service criminal history checks, perform site monitoring visits, compile and submit reports, and support site supervisors and members. HMHB would only proceed with an operating grant or support another organization doing so if it could ensure all these components were in place.

Conclusion

HMHB has appreciated the opportunity to explore a potential AmeriCorps State program to enhance programs and improve outcomes for Montana's pregnant and parenting families. While HMHB was not able to proceed with applying for an operating grant at this time, we learned a great deal about existing and planned AmeriCorps programs, and we cultivated and expanded on relationships with stakeholders throughout Montana. We are hopeful that this report and the work behind it will support AmeriCorps planning and operating grantees in the future.