

**Testimony Notes – Senate Commerce & Economic Development
Breck Knauff, Executive Director Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC)
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Introduction – Breck Knauff, Exec Dir of VYCC and Serve Learn Earn partner

Thank you for invitation to talk about the American Climate Corps. I was able to travel to Washington, DC right after this initiative was announced, meet with federal partners, and learn a great deal more about the ACC. Met with two representatives from the White House, Jasmeen Shaheen-McConnell (Senior advisor for strategic partnerships at AmeriCorps) and Maggie Thomas (Chief of Staff of Office of Domestic Climate Policy). I thought I would share information about what the ACC is (and isn't) and what it can look like here in Vermont.

Big Picture – That the Biden administration is promoting and elevating the value of public service – and aligning this with climate change – is fantastic. This represents a tremendous opportunity for conservation corps.

Basic Facts –

- Helpful to think about the ACC as an initiative focused on People, Projects, and Pathways. Participants will be all Americans, with a particular focus on young adults and traditionally underserved communities; there is a real equity focus here. The project focus will be on climate resiliency and clean energy. This is very much a workforce development initiative; our country needs to radically increase the number of people entering the green economy workforce.
- There is no “new” funding for this. Funding will come from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act. The White House is now pouring through these laws to identify funding streams that can be focused on this initiative. It's also possible that increased funding will be dedicated to AmeriCorps through state service commissions – whether or not it means that AC members will be paid more, or there will just be an effort to recruit more people into AC is an open question.
- The White House hopes to enroll 20,000 members in the work of the ACC in 2024. For context, conservation corps nationally enroll ~23,000. Looking at the numbers helps us understand an important point, perhaps the most important point:
- This is not a new program. This is about leveraging the work of existing organizations in ways that harness strengths, help recruitment, focus work where it's needed most, and steer resources into states. There will not be 20,000 new or additional members. Rather, most of the members of existing conservation corps will be counted as American Climate Corps Members.
- Finally, it's clear – and a bit surprising, frankly – that this initiative was announced without a fleshed-out implementation plan. This means that there is an opportunity for corps to guide and shape the plan.

ACC in Vermont – Basic Facts inform implementation.....

- If the ACC is not a new entity, but instead organizations that focus on people, projects, and pathways, helpful to look at organizations doing all three here in Vermont.
- In this sense, we see Serve Learn Earn as collaboration that aligns with objectives of ACC.
 - VYCC, ReSOURCE, Vermont Works for Women, and Audubon VT
 - All four focus on People, Projects, and Pathways
 - Over past two years, over 1,000 people worked and learned in our programs, completing over 7,200 weeks of work, earning over \$2.6M in wages and stipends, as well as over 300 credentials of value.

While we're not ready to change our names to ACC, we are doing the work.

- There are certainly other organizations doing this work – In this sense, ACC is a coalition with SLE at the center.
- As this coalition develops and figures out what ACC can look like, there are a few essential elements:
 - Compensation and the value to Participants is key – We need to find ways to make the CM experience as value as possible.
 - Make the connection to Climate Work explicit and defensible – This is the leading issue for prospective members. How projects make a landscape more resilient and/or reduce our use of fossil fuels is essential. We're doing this now with Serve Learn Earn's Flood Response. ReSOURCE is lead partner here and doing great work partnering with Barre Up
 - Support of Members – Corps Members are arriving with more pronounced needs than earlier generations. And, Corps have much DEI work to do to make the experience welcoming, accessible, and empowering for all.
 - Future Opportunities – Creating systems for Members to access future opportunities is key. We do this by providing credentials of value, college credit, pathways into jobs, education and/or future training.

These program elements are essential and key to recruitment. And, they represent costs above and beyond traditional project funding. **Therefore, if we are going to align workforce needs with climate needs (which is a big part of what ACC is about), it's critical that the legislature continue its support of the Serve Learn Earn partnership. We are requesting \$2.37M this year, a 3% increase over last year. And, we are asking that we move from one-time funds into the base budget.**