

- VT Youth Conversation Corps – We are an independent 501c(3) with the mission to *Take Action and Build Community by Working and Learning together with the Land*. We offer paid service opportunities to young adults who work on small teams – crews – and complete high priority projects that strengthen Vermont communities.
- Our projects fall into five general categories: Food & Farm, Water Quality, Outdoor Recreation, Forestry, and Carpentry
- In any given year, we will enroll (hire) 200 young adults between the ages of 16-24 to work and learn on our crews
- In within this “ecosystem” that we’ve been working with young adults for over 35 years (founded in 1985)
- Over the past 5-10 years, we are seeing our corps members come to us with a higher level of mental health challenges. While VYCC is not a therapeutic organization, there’s no doubt that being outside, work with meaning, and being part of a supportive community are essential ingredients to wellness and resiliency. We have put more and more focus on supporting our corps members with wellness and resiliency in mind.
- It’s also worth noting that every Corps across the country – and there are over 150 corps of all sizes – are seeing mental health challenges among their corps members. Feelings of disconnectedness, heightened anxiety, depression, and more are prevalent.
- The statistics are more than troubling. This [recent conversation with the Surgeon General](#) is a good place to start.
- One strategy (among many) that VYCC has developed can be seen in the way that we now offer mental health support services for our Corps Members. Four years ago, we formed a partnership with Centerpoint Adolescent Services. Our staff are not trained as counselors, but that doesn’t mean we can’t put structures in place to help.
- In this partnership, we have a contract with Centerpoint each year. They provide trainings for our staff and Crew Leaders. They run workshops and attend Crew Leader trainings. They also have one counselor “assigned” to VYCC. This counselor visits each crew. Not only that, but team of counselors is on call whenever a VYCC Corps Member needs support. This allows our team to focus on what we do best while also providing much needed support to our members.
- Last year, on average, our Corps Members used this on call support once a day (one call / day from the field from our crews, not each member!)
- As we look ahead, we know this work will continue. We’re designing our leader training to provide more support so folks can feel comfortable when in the field – working across differences, managing hard conversations, knowing when a Corps Member needs a break v. just needing a conversation are all topics we cover.

While this trend is concerning, the good news is that experiences like VYCC make a profound difference. We see our members gain confidence, new friendships, and skills to pursue future opportunities. Outdoors, work with meaning, and a supportive community. This is what we all need, especially young people.

Thank you for your interest and support of VYCC and similar programs. On this note, VYCC is part of a workforce development coalition called “Serve Learn Earn” I’m sorry that I am unable to join you all this morning, but would very much welcome the opportunity to talk with you all in the near future.

Warmly,

Breck Knauft