

# Community service cuts could prove costly to Oregon

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STAFF WRITER

Amid the slew of budget cuts rolling out of the House in recent weeks is the elimination of the Corporation for National and Community Service. The name probably doesn't ring a bell for most people in Portland, or anywhere, for that matter, but it is the reason that about 15,000 people, of all ages, are able to volunteer to help children, the elderly, disabled and poor across Oregon.

The proposal would eliminate AmeriCorps, Learn & Serve, and the Senior Corps programs, which engage adults, seniors and youths in volunteer positions in hospitals, schools, government agencies and community service programs. Nationally, about 3 million volunteers are mobilized through Corporation-funded programs.



If enacted the impact of the cuts will have a ripple affect across Oregon that includes the loss of volunteers, the loss of volunteer hours and commitments to thousands of agencies, even a loss in

education funding. More than 1,200 AmeriCorps positions would be terminated if the cuts go through, according to AmeriCorps. Since 1994, more than 13,000 AmeriCorps members in Oregon have contributed an estimated 15 million hours of service.

"In the United States, we need every option we can offer to the citizens who want to serve. We should have every option available to them," says Patricia Bollin, Oregon AmeriCorps Program Officer.

The federal funding allows AmeriCorps to pay volunteers a small living allowance while they're committed to a year of focused volunteer work. It also comes with an education award. That education award translates into about \$2.5 million annually going to Oregon colleges and universities to pay for tuition and student loans, Bollin says. That includes volunteers who are placed in Oregon through the national AmeriCorps program.

"It's not federal money being shot out into the universe," Bollin says. "This is federal money that is landing in the state."

"The services that members perform, and the numbers of small nonprofits across the state that reap the benefits of that

service, are innumerable," Bollin says.

Among the top users of AmeriCorps volunteers nationally is Habitat for Humanity. Steve Messinetti, the executive director of Habitat for Humanity Portland Metro East, says they currently have six AmeriCorps volunteers among a staff of less than 20.

"They are critical in carrying out our work," Messinetti says. "They're working 40 hours a week with us. They couldn't just donate that. ... They play just as important a role as any staff position, and therefore allow us to accomplish much more than we could otherwise."

Andy Nelson, executive director of the volunteer network Hands on Greater Portland, says people don't realize the impact or leverage created by these volunteer programs.

"With high unemployment, what AmeriCorps is providing is a kind of WPA (Work Projects Administration) effort, and that is significant," Nelson says. "It's hard to find a job, and this gives people experience, skills and a way to contribute."

For Senior Corps, which includes Foster Grandparents, RSVP and Senior Companions, the funding supports a small stipend of \$2.65 per hour for volunteers to offset the time and costs associated with volunteering, such as the cost of gas mileage. It's a stipend that makes volunteering feasible for people on a small, fixed income, like Helen Hoxworth.

Hoxworth, 83, is a Foster Grandparents volunteer at the Center for Medically Fragile Children at Providence Child Center.

"It gives me something to do, but the main thing is that I think a lot of these kids," says Hoxworth, who has volunteered there for 11 years. "On some days, if it weren't for the kids, I wouldn't get out of bed."

The Center has 58 children in residence, all with profound disabilities and in need of long-term medical care. Hoxworth is one of several "grandmas" who help the children get ready for school, help with homework, read to them, socialize with them and provide general care. The center is one of only a few in the country that provides this service, and the families of many of the residents are hundreds of miles away.

"The grandmas are such a part of the care that these children receive," said Jody Wright, Volunteer Coordinator for the Providence Child Center. "I don't know what staff would do if they didn't have them around anymore." The Foster Grandparent program has worked with the Center for 20 years.

Save Service in America, a coalition of community services advocates, estimates that if the House cuts come to pass, 1,900 youths in Oregon will lose foster grandparents, 1,300 homebound seniors will lose Senior Companions.

The programs funded through the Corporation for National and Community Service often fill gaps in service left by years of cuts to other programs, such as in-home care for the elderly and disabled. Oregon Project Independence, which provides support service that allows people to stay at home and not be institutionalized, survived a budget elimination last year, but is this year on the chopping block for \$4 million, nearly half of its current \$10 million budget. With those cuts, go increased demand on programs like Senior Companion, which enrolls seniors to help other older adults maintain their independence in their home. Senior Companion has 46 companions serving about 215 clients in Lynn, Benton, Lincoln and Multnomah counties.

"The need for this program has become even greater with the other cuts that have already happened in other areas," says Melissa Maxon with Senior Companions. "To cut this program, you're going to be having seniors found dead in their homes, because they're not going to have anybody who is coming to check in on them."

"The impact is at both ends of the generational spectrum," says Lynn Schemmer-Valleau, volunteer coordinator with the Multnomah County Aging and Disabilities Services, which oversees the Foster Grandparent program. "There is the impact on the kids and the long-term impact if these volunteers were not there. And there's the impact on the older adult, in keeping them engaged, active, and the value they get from the experience."

The line from Congress is that the country's extreme fiscal crisis demands the cuts, that the situation is too grave to hold on to these kinds of programs.

However, the cuts won't really save anything, Schemmer-Valleau says.

"Spend it there or spend it elsewhere, but it will be spent. If you don't do the program, those folks who are volunteering are no longer spending their stipend in the community. They're no longer engaged in the community, so their health deteriorates. And those kids who are not getting the education; spend it on them with their lack of education, their lack of productivity — all of those things. Spend this little bit, right now, and the outcome is huge."

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— PATRICIA BOLLIN  
OREGON AMERICORPS



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