NC VetsCorps: Supporting Economically Vulnerable Veterans and Military Families

Lessons and Strategies for Program Design, Practice, and Policy from a Three-Year Demonstration Program

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Introduction

A homeless veteran living in his van desperately needs a job and car repairs. He gets both. Another veteran who’s disabled and barely getting by needs help filing his disability claim with the Veterans Administration. He gets help, and finds he’s entitled to a $100-a-month increase and receives $3,200 in back benefits that were due him. A NC VetsCorps member working with a North Carolina United Way agency on a faltering program to end homelessness researches programs to help homeless veterans in other parts of the country, creates a way to keep track of homeless veterans as new ways are found to help them, and the program gains a new momentum.

We honor veterans as the defenders of American ideals, people who are asked to put their lives on the line to protect our freedoms. But we don’t always match our respect and appreciation for them with our actions after they’ve served. These cases are emblematic of the many challenges faced by America’s veterans—and the work of 35 AmeriCorps members, working with 17 community organizations, who recruited and trained nearly 2,000 volunteers to help them in MDC’s NC VetsCorps program. Altogether, NC VetsCorps served more than 9,000 veterans and military families in North Carolina over the three-year course of the program. That just scratches the surface of the 736,000 veterans living in North Carolina—representing nearly 10 percent of the state’s population, according to the Carolina Population Center at UNC-CH. But the lessons learned in NC VetsCorps can bring those kinds of results to thousands more veterans and their families in North Carolina and beyond.

We learned:

• It takes a special understanding of the particular needs of veterans and the institutions that serve them. One of those needs, discovered during the course of the program, is the importance of legal assistance for veterans who have less than honorable discharges, often for minor offenses, that can be upgraded and allow those veterans to get the benefits that will lead to healthy, productive lives. Another special need is mental health care.

• The importance of exposing staff at community service organizations to the specific institutions that serve veterans and training them in how to navigate those systems.

• It is essential to create connections between all institutions in a community that offer services to residents needing support, and for them to recognize that the needs and opportunities for veterans are unique and often require special solutions.

• In order to help all veterans gain economic stability and a chance to participate in the American Dream they fought to defend, policies are essential that ensure and expand access to financial supports; address the intersection of the criminal justice system, housing, and employment; and help employers understand the unique skills that veterans have, while helping veterans translate their training into sought-after job skills.

It is with a heightened understanding of the needs of veterans, their families, and their communities that we offer this report on the challenges and successes of the NC VetsCorps program. We hope it will help others meet the needs of these valued members of our communities and allow them to participate in the American Dream they gave so much to defend.
Summary

MDC designed and sponsored the NC VetsCorps program to deploy AmeriCorps members with community-based organizations across North Carolina to build their institutional capacities to help economically vulnerable veterans and military families achieve greater economic stability. The theory of the program was that building these institutional capacities would connect more economically vulnerable veterans and military families with resources and services to help them achieve greater economic stability.

The program set goals for NC VetsCorps members and their “host site” organizations to connect at least 4,700 economically veterans and military families with legal, food, clothing, medical, utility, education, employment, and housing resources and services and to recruit at least 1,275 volunteers to support the missions of the organizations. The members and organizations exceeded those goals by serving 9,308 veterans and military families and recruiting 1,922 volunteers.

Many lessons and implications for strategy, program design, practice, and policy emerged from the program.

• **Practice:** Supporting a veterans-supporting infrastructure includes:
  - Community connections: Creating supportive referral relationships between organizations and expanding the reach and efficacy of existing support structures, especially to legal services that remove barriers to accessing resources and services
  - Organizational connections: Helping veterans and military families navigate the varied and not always well-connected systems necessary to meet their needs
  - Professional development: Providing training and technical assistance to strengthen organizations and professionals serving veterans and military families

• **AmeriCorps:** For those considering whether to sponsor an AmeriCorps program, this report analyzes the opportunities and challenges for AmeriCorps members and host site and lead organizations.

• **Policy:** Supporting this infrastructure through local, state, and federal policy includes:
  - Expanding access to financial supports.
  - Addressing the intersection of the criminal justice system, housing, and employment
  - Providing access to trauma and mental health care
  - Supporting demand-side strategies to stimulate job creation and economic growth

MDC thanks its financial supporters, staff members, AmeriCorps members, and host site organizations for their work in making the NC VetsCorps program successful. MDC publishes this report with the intent of informing and influencing practitioners and policymakers to empower economically vulnerable veterans and military families, who proudly served or are serving our country, towards great economic security and success.
**Development**

The NC VetsCorps program arose from the experiences of front-line, community-based organizations partnering with MDC in The Benefit Bank® of North Carolina initiative, which connects low-income families with work and income supports. These organizations reported to MDC that they were seeing increasing numbers of economically vulnerable veterans and military families needing assistance, especially as military operations wound down in Afghanistan and Iraq. The increasing numbers were consistent with statistics showing that North Carolina has a large population of veterans, with more than 700,000 veterans living in the state.¹ Plus, there are many military installations in North Carolina where military families reside and many veterans and their families settle after completing their service.

Since these community-based organizations were not primarily veterans-serving, their staff and volunteers were struggling to understand and meet the needs of increasing numbers of veterans and military families seeking assistance. MDC’s decided that deploying AmeriCorps members would build the capacities of these community-based organizations and develop and demonstrate new strategies for serving economically vulnerable veterans and military families.

MDC applied for and received a planning grant from the federal Corporation for National and Community Service, through the North Carolina Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service. The Commission is the state’s conduit for funding from the Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that administers the AmeriCorps national service program. MDC designed the NC VetsCorps program using planning grant funds and then applied for and received three success federal grants, and matching funds from philanthropy, for the program.

**Program Design**

MDC launched the NC VetsCorps program on January 1, 2014, to research, develop, and demonstrate effective community-based models for connecting economically vulnerable veterans and military families with resources and services. Consistent with AmeriCorps’s mission “to strengthen communities and develop leaders through team-based national and community service,” NC VetsCorps placed AmeriCorps members with community-based organizations to build their capacities to connect veterans and military families with resources and services in three major areas: (1) homelessness and housing services, (2) legal assistance, and (3) economic opportunity.

The NC VetsCorps program involved three key components: AmeriCorps members, their host sites, and MDC as the lead organization:

- **Members:** 35 AmeriCorps members, over the three years of the program, were recruited and placed by MDC with host sites across the state. Almost 40 percent of members were veterans or family members of veterans or active duty military personnel. Members with military connections drew on personal and professional military experience to increase understanding of veteran’s issues at host sites, with MDC, and among other NC VetsCorps members.

- **Host sites:** 17 community-based organizations, recruited, selected, and supported by MDC, served as host sites over the three years. Members were matched with host sites that could
benefit from their professional skills. For example, as available, attorneys and paralegals were placed at Legal Aid sites, and social workers were placed with human service organizations. With the members in place, host sites had more staff capacity to conduct outreach and connect military families with resources and services. Organizations serving as host sites were:

- Central Carolina Community College (Years 1-3)
- Charlotte Bridge Home (Year 3)
- Family Endeavors: Charlotte, Fayetteville, Jacksonville (Years 1-3)
- Homeward Bound (Year 2)
- Interactive Resource Center (Years 1-2)
- Legal Aid of NC: Durham, Fayetteville, Greensboro, New Bern, Wilmington (Years 1-3)
- NABVETS (Year 1)
- Prosperity Unlimited (Year 1)
- Stop Soldier Suicide (Year 3)
- United Way of the Cape Fear Area (Year 2)
- Urban Ministries—Durham (Year 1)

- **Lead organization:** MDC served as the lead organization—recruiting, training, and supporting members and host sites, monitoring compliance according to Corporation and Commission rules and regulations, fostering, learning, and sharing strategies among NC VetsCorps members and host sites through conference calls, trainings, and meeting, and securing philanthropic support to serve as matching funds against the federal grant dollars.

The placement and hosting of NC VetsCorps members in the third and final year are shown below:

NC VetsCorps program was supported by three successive federal grants, issued by the North Carolina Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service from the Corporation for National and Community Service, and by matching grants, including support from The Duke Endowment, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, Wells Fargo, Triangle Community Foundation, Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro, Child Trust Foundation, and Talent Curve.
Activities

NC VetCorps members participated in a wide variety of activities to build and support the capacities of their host site organizations to connect economically veterans and military families with legal, food, clothing, medical, utility, education, employment, and housing resources and services. NC VetsCorps members focused on helping families secure stable housing, including by securing temporary shelter, emergency assistance to retain homes, VA benefits access, preparation of wills and advance directive documents, discharge upgrades, criminal record expunctions, and employment-related skill development. Examples of activities include:

- A member serving with Legal Aid of North Carolina in Durham helped a client apply for disability compensation benefits from the VA. The client received a check for $3,200 in back benefits and was awarded an additional $100/month in benefits moving forward, a significant increase for someone struggling to make ends meet each month.

- A homeless veteran who had been living in his van came to the Fayetteville Family Endeavors office for help with VA benefits access. His van was in dire need of repair. The NC VetsCorps member connected him with the NC Works office that helped him find a local retail job. The member also connected him with two other veteran-serving organizations that helped him to complete most of his vehicle repairs and assist with his VA benefits claim.

- The member hosted by the United Way of the Cape Fear Area in Wilmington served on the local Homeless Veterans Strategy Team, a group that met monthly to advance the area’s 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness. The group had been meeting for a few years, but interest and participation had begun to wane—just a few months before the national deadline for ending homelessness for veterans. The group learned about some new tactics for reducing homelessness in the veteran communities in New Orleans, Las Cruces, and Winston-Salem, all of which had recently announced a functional zero for their homeless veteran count. The NC VetsCorps member developed a mechanism for tracking a master list of homeless veterans, expanded the invitation list for the meeting, and led the meeting to establish a process for implementing and maintaining the list. Some caseworkers at the meeting discovered new and different approaches for cases. The new meeting format and development of a new strategy renewed momentum toward the goal of ending homelessness for veterans in the area.

- In 2015, all NC VetsCorps members participated in a letter-writing campaign with Operation Gratitude, a national nonprofit that includes a personal letter in each of the more than 150,000 care packages they send every year to new recruits, veterans, Wounded Warriors, and U.S. service members deployed overseas. NC VetsCorps members recruited over 1,000 volunteers from local schools, churches, military bases, and community organizations to write letters. Using a recruitment guide provided by NC VetsCorps program staff, members were also able to acquire crayons, markers, and paper donations from Target and Staples in the Wilmington, NC area. At a culminating Day of Service event, members and additional volunteers from MDC wrote letters, and organized the letters for each of Operation Gratitude’s focus populations. Members collected more than 2,000 letters in less than 2 months. Letters came from a wide variety of community members, from elementary schools, Girl Scout Troops, senior centers, and numerous Stand Down events.
**Results**

The program set goals for NC VetsCorps members and their host site organizations to connect at least 4,700 economically vulnerable veterans and military families with legal, food, clothing, medical, utility, education, employment, and housing resources and services, and to recruit at least 1,275 volunteers to support the missions of the organizations. The members and organizations exceeded those goals by serving 9,308 veterans and military families and recruiting 1,922 volunteers:

![Program Results Graph]

**Lessons and Implications**

There are many lessons and strategies learned from the NC VetsCorps demonstration program to inform practice and policy moving forward. MDC through this report shares these with the field, including with Veterans Service Organizations, County Veterans Service Officers, state government veterans’ affairs departments, legal aid entities, community-based organizations, host sites, and funding partners in North Carolina and across the South, with the goal of influencing and improving practice and policy in serving economically vulnerable veterans and military families.

The experience of NC VetsCorps is that many economically vulnerable services veterans and their families are not aware of help that is available, including for example, from Veterans Service Organizations and County Veterans Service Offices, despite best efforts. They turn to community-based organizations that are not necessarily equipped to serve veterans and military families, which need to be connected and integrated with organizations trained and able to provide this assistance.
There are many military, governmental, and community-based organizations currently serving economically vulnerable veterans and military families that could be part of an aligned infrastructure of opportunity. The individual and collaborative work of the NC VetsCorps members, in building the capacities of organizations and communities to serve economically vulnerable veterans and military families, highlight components for establishing the infrastructure of opportunity for this population:

- **Community connections:** Establish supportive referral relationships between organizations as well as opportunities to expand the reach and efficacy of existing support structures, especially to legal services, that remove barriers to accessing resources and services.
- **Organizational connections:** Make it easier for veterans and military families to navigate the varied and not always well-connected systems necessary to meet their needs.
- **Professional development:** Provide training and technical assistance to promote learning and strengthen other organizations and professionals serving veterans and military families.

These actions contribute to establishing a community’s infrastructure of opportunity for service members and military families, veterans transitioning from service to civilian life, and those who left service long ago and are struggling to find long-term economic security.

**Community Connections**

**Supportive Referral Relationships**

NC VetsCorps members were placed in community-based organizations with well-established referral relationships. Service alignment often begins with these existing referral relationships among agencies that serve similar populations but have different offerings. Members met with other social service organizations—some with their own AmeriCorps service members—to develop or strengthen supportive referral relationships, expand existing services, connect veteran and service member clients with emergency and other resources, and explore the creation of joint programming for veterans and military families. This relationship-building blossomed as members developed competence within their host organizations and established themselves as trusted resources in their respective communities.

**Veteran Collaboratives**

*Relationships are a key first step, but to ensure consistent and effective services for clients and allocate resources wisely, system alignment can be facilitated by formal partnership agreements, which include accountability and common vision for outcomes. Here, Jessie Hermann, a Year 3 NC VetsCorps member, describes the work of Charlotte Bridge Home within the new NCServes initiative, which is part of the national AmeriServes initiative (see www.americaserves.org).*

Charlotte Bridge Home (CBH), a former NC VetsCorps host site, is a leader in creating collective impact partnerships. CBH works as the Coordination Center for NCServes–Metrolina. NCServes is a coordinated network of community services comprised of the region’s public, private, and nonprofit sector providers, selected because of their record of effectiveness and capacity. Participating organizations use a common case management technology platform to
create accountability and formalize communication across organizations. The network streamlines access to comprehensive, community-based services that best address veterans’ and military families’ needs, according to data collected by the network of organizations. Those needs are predominately employment, housing, and financial assistance. The network functions by codifying each provider’s services, capacity, and eligibility requirements, and facilitating accurate service referrals for network users. An NC VetsCorps member serving at CBH assisted in the creation of more than 50 service requests and internal referrals to case managers, who then made referrals to formalized partner organizations. Each network organization could access the client’s information and was accountable for reporting outcomes and case closures. The member engaged with 245 veterans to discuss upcoming events and opportunities to get involved with Charlotte Bridge Home, and assisted in the planning, implementation, and follow-up of events to support the NCServes network and each veteran’s needs. In its first year, from August 2015 to August 2016, NCServes worked with 1,241 unique veterans and 2,814 varying assistance requests.

Supportive referral relationships are vital to garnering all the resources needed to serve clients who face many adjustments in lifestyle leaving the service. A holistic approach to services for veterans may include individual and group counseling in areas such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), substance addiction assessment and treatment, suicide prevention referrals, and civilian career connection and related training. One example of how NC VetsCorps created such connection came from Wilmington. The member serving there met two veterans leading new nonprofit organizations with a veterans-serving focus. The individuals had not met and were not aware of each other’s organizations. The NC VetsCorps member made the introduction so they could share resources and expand networks; both reported that collaboration was immediately beneficial to the organizations and their clients.

**USING EXISTING STRUCTURES TO INCREASE REACH**

In many cases, NC VetsCorps members took their expertise outside of their host sites to expand access to services, including participation at community events, holding office hours or clinics at VA medical facilities or Veteran’s Outreach Centers (VOC), or presenting to other veterans-serving organizations.

*Stand Down Events.* “Stand Down” refers to a community-based intervention program coordinated by the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans to provide relief and support to homeless veterans. Homeless veterans are brought together at single locations for one to three days. There, they can take advantage of community resources, like free health and dental care, as well as mental health counseling and emergency assistance. Brain science research shows that delivering multiple social services—especially nutrition assistance—at convenient locations and providing support with navigating the complex web of social services are effective strategies for helping low-income households, suffering from the financial stress caused by poverty, to access needed services.²

NC VetsCorps members hosted at Legal Aid of NC served alongside other agencies, distributing information and speaking with veterans and their family members about the services and supports
available to them, ranging from assistance with criminal record expungement to wills to benefits access. The members made numerous new contacts and met potential clients. They gained a better sense and clear picture of needs common among veterans. They also learned more about the services of other agencies and formed positive relationships with staff at these organizations.

“We had participated in stand-down events even before the NC VetsCorps members came, but the members helped us get better organized for the Stand Down events. Veterans are a much hidden population and people don’t like to identify themselves, so Stand Downs have become a great way of reaching out.”

—Legal Aid of North Carolina Host Site Supervisor, Willette Crews

**Legal clinics.** NC VetsCorps members served many clients at legal clinics at host sites and other locations. For example, the Veterans’ Justice Officer at the Durham Veterans Administration contacted a member about adding wills and advance directives to the Durham VA’s monthly legal clinic. At least three members participated in pilot Wills Clinics hosted by the NC Bar Association. Members helped veterans complete wills, healthcare powers of attorney, living wills, and advance directive documents. The NC Bar Association hopes to establish this as a permanent clinic.

These clinics and similar services are critical, especially if veterans are not aware of their rights or do not have the confidence to go to court. That could lead to time delays and further complications. As Andre Brown from the Fayetteville office of Legal Aid of NC said, “It’s hard to feel like you will have a shot if you are not aware of your rights or if you are impoverished and don’t have resources available to you.”

With supportive case management provided by NC VetsCorps members, a veteran was awarded more than $10,000 in back pension pay. In another case, an elderly, disabled veteran living on a limited income faced a landlord who illegally demanded that the tenant pay for repairs that were the landlord’s responsibility. The issue was resolved with advocacy from an NC VetsCorps member; without that support, the veteran might have faced eviction and homelessness.

**Organizational Connections**

**LINKING LEGAL AID AND SOCIAL SERVICES**

One of the most significant lessons from NC VetsCorps, which took place in the program’s first year, happened when members reported that many clients had legal issues that prevented them from accessing traditional and veteran-focused social services. For example, a veteran may need to have a criminal record expunged—a process that seals prior criminal convictions—before applying for housing assistance or other veteran’s benefits.
To address legal needs in subsequent program years, MDC’s NC VetsCorps program staff encouraged members placed with Legal Aid agencies and those placed with human service provider agencies in the same area to collaborate to best serve these clients. Recognizing the importance of this strategy, MDC also re-doubled its efforts to place members at Legal Aid of NC offices across the state. Legal Aid of NC provides free legal help to low-income North Carolinians in civil cases involving basic human needs like safety, shelter, and income. Veterans’ cases involved access to benefits for veterans, public housing issues, expungement of criminal records, upgrading of discharge status, and family law, including domestic violence. NC VetsCorps also helped to build the capacity of Legal Aid to serve veterans and military families when Legal Aid hired NC VetsCorps members for full-time positions after their AmeriCorps service.

Members from social service and legal aid organizations were encouraged to link services together to meet client needs. These links made critical supports possible. For example, veterans with less than honorable discharge status cannot access VA benefits. An NC VetsCorps member served a client who was dishonorably discharged under earlier military policies regarding sexual orientation; this veteran, a Military Sexual Trauma survivor, was unable to access VA benefits. A discharge upgrade, secured with help from an NC VetsCorps member at Legal Aid of NC, enabled the veteran to receive critical social services, including trauma counseling and other health care benefits through the VA. Others appealed, successfully, less than honorable discharges because the underlying behaviors, resulting in the discharges, were from service-related trauma.

Another example of the power of linking legal and social services in the Wilmington area came from Legal Aid of NC and the United Way of the Cape Fear Area. United Way of the Cape Fear Area is a partner in its region’s 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness and improve affordable housing options and set out to increase their veterans and military outreach. The NC VetsCorps member at Legal Aid of NC-Wilmington was first introduced to a veteran client seeking to resolve a particular legal challenge and pursue benefits for a post-traumatic stress, service-related disability. By coordinating with the NC VetsCorps member serving at United Way of Cape Fear, the two members helped the veteran receive the counseling and evaluation necessary to resolve his legal claim, additional support to manage his Social Security Disability application, and referrals for transportation support and financial literacy services. These interactions not only improve outcomes for individuals, but they also strengthen a community’s network of organizations serving veterans and military families.

Organizational Capacity

Professional Development

NC VetsCorps Members created professional development opportunities for their own organizations and others. For example, two members placed with Legal Aid of NC offices developed professional development offerings for other attorneys, delivering Continuing Legal Education (CLE) certified training on veterans’ issues. The members strengthened their own professional skill sets and built unique expertise, while expanding the capacities of their host sites and beyond. Legal Aid of North Carolina has increased its offerings for veterans statewide based on the practices and processes developed by NC VetsCorps members. Presentations were also disseminated via webinars for the Veteran’s Administration and conference calls for attorney
groups. They recognized the need for this kind of professional development before hosting NC VetsCorps members, but the additional capacity enabled them to meet that need with specific expertise and offerings.

MDC is exploring the creation and offering of reasonably-priced, online training modules that could be used to build the capacities of front-line, community-based organizations serving economic vulnerable veterans and non-veteran individuals and families alike. These might include topics such as integrated services delivery, effective communication skills, and community collaboration.

**Mobilizing Volunteers**

During the three years of the NC VetsCorps program, members recruited and engaged more than 1,900 community volunteers for host site organizations. Volunteers worked as call-center specialists, staff for outreach events, and letter-writers for Operation Gratitude, a national organization that solicits letters of support for U.S. active duty military service members stationed all over the world. Merging volunteerism with client service, Charlotte Bridge Home focused on connecting veterans with volunteer opportunities within its metropolitan areas to help veterans transition into civilian life.

**Sponsoring an AmeriCorps Program**

MDC values the lessons learned from the NC VetsCorps for practice and policy in the field, while cautioning that sponsoring an AmeriCorps program is challenging and not for every community or organization, particularly because of complex federal and state regulations and requirements governing AmeriCorps. Also, funding for AmeriCorps and the entire Corporation for National and Community Service is proposed to be eliminated from the federal government’s budget, although this has not happened yet, casting uncertainty about the future of AmeriCorps national service.3 This section of the Report outlines opportunities and challenges for communities and organizations considering sponsoring AmeriCorps members to help strengthen the infrastructure of opportunity for economically vulnerable veterans and military families in their own communities.

**Opportunities**

**For AmeriCorps Members**

Sponsoring AmeriCorps members allows community members, often young people or those transitioning to new careers, to receive training and development opportunities from their host site and lead organizations. The AmeriCorps national service experience is designed to build professional skills for future education and employment. MDC provided three in-person member trainings each year—orientation, mid-year training, and exit training. The trainings were carefully designed to help members prepare for, succeed in, and reflect on their service. Training content covered AmeriCorps history and regulations, disaster preparedness, and the logistical and emotional demands of serving a high-need population.

In addition to service-related activities, we encouraged members to consider appropriate self-care to sustain them through demanding service and to consider what they were learning from participating in national service. This included personal growth and professional development, including résumé review and interview practice. A host site supervisor noted the important
connection and rapport that members developed at the MDC trainings. In addition to face-to-face trainings, MDC supported an online learning network to facilitate connections among members. Members also may be able to complete specific certifications to carry with them after their service. For example, the members at Stop Soldier Suicide received QPR (Question, Persuade, and Refer) Gatekeeper Training for Suicide Prevention as well as a professional coaching certification through Hawkeye’s veterans-focused training program.

AmeriCorps members receive a living stipend and, after successful completion of the service, are eligible for the Segal Education awards, which can be applied to future education expenses or to existing student loan debt. Several NC VetsCorps members were in undergraduate or graduate school during their service. Living stipends decreased dependence on student loans and reduced student debt. These students, and those who already had student debt or wanted to pursue postsecondary or graduate educational programs, benefited from the education award. Many members exiting the program transitioned easily into educational programs or employment, some within their host sites. Three attorneys were hired by Legal Aid of North Carolina, and one member was hired by Charlotte Bridge Home. This is another important way in which NC VetsCorps built the capacities of organizations to serve economically vulnerable veterans and military families.

**FOR HOST SITES**

Host sites benefit in multiple ways from sponsoring an AmeriCorps program. Many community-based organizations have insufficient staffing or difficulty paying competitive salaries for well-qualified candidates. They may be limited in their ability to assist economically vulnerable clients at the scale needed within their service areas. Securing full-time NC VetsCorps members gave host sites the ability to provide critical services to larger numbers of veterans, service members, and their families, as well as civilian clients. NC VetsCorps members developed new partnerships and created innovative programs. They provided outreach, recruited volunteers, and built links to other veteran-serving organizations, which expanded referral options for clients. Hosting full-time NC VetsCorps members with professional skills (attorneys, paralegals, social workers) was of particular value to some of the host sites, expanding core competencies and the organization’s professional reputation. Such competencies can help improve funding streams, solidify the knowledge base within a community, and increase engagement of other organizations.

The addition of NC VetsCorps members at the host sites served a “force multiplier” for the organizations and generated excellent return on investment. For example, with NC VetsCorps members, Legal Aid of NC filled knowledge gaps on veteran issues; veterans no longer had to be told that the organization did not have the necessary expertise. Prior to the NC VetsCorps program, when clients were asked “Are you a veteran?” it was mainly to collect demographic information, but NC VetsCorps created dedicated team members with direct experience who could offer specific services relevant to veterans. NC VetsCorps members at Legal Aid of NC developed topical trainings and presented these in-person and online in multiple venues, increasing the knowledge base about veterans’ legal services across the state.

“They were able to focus solely on veteran issues and the laws that pertain to veterans. They filled the knowledge gap about the
veterans and they then increased the knowledge of Legal Aid as a whole. Because of NC VetsCorps, we are able to help veterans with benefits application, disability, and other services that veterans want to access.”

—Legal Aid of North Carolina Host Site Supervisor, Willette Crews

FOR LEAD ORGANIZATIONS

The lead organization gains by experiencing an expanded presence in the direct-service sphere, learning about and from other organizations doing similar work—a testing ground for different delivery and training models. Over the course of NC VetsCorps, MDC learned about specific resources for veterans and military families and gaps in service delivery that could be incorporated into other family economic security initiatives. MDC observed varied organizational structures across host sites, like the collective impact, managed-care model of direct service implemented by the NCServes in four locations in North Carolina (Charlotte, Triangle, Coastal, and Western). This model inspired and informed MDC’s new work in partnership with the United Way of Greater Greensboro and community stakeholders to create a “Family Success Network” and to build a community-based infrastructure, using an evidence-based approach, called Integrated Services Delivery (ISD), to empower low-income households to meet their financial goals and move up the economic ladder.

Challenges

While participation in AmeriCorps opens up opportunities for critical learning and relationships, it is, of course, not without challenges for members, host sites, and lead organizations.

FOR MEMBERS

Members are recruited quickly and, depending on program structure, may have limited input into their placement selection. Like in any new position, members must train and integrate quickly into their host site organizations. They and their host sites may struggle with the distinctions between staff, AmeriCorps members, volunteers, and interns. Treatment and supervision needs to be tailored and distinct for each of these groups. Members and host site supervisors should receive orientation from the lead organization, especially if they will be placed in organizations geographically distant from the lead organization. Clarification of roles and responsibilities and expectations about frequency of reporting—both formal and informal—are key to avoiding escalation of performance issues.

In addition to learning the organizational structure, there is content knowledge to master. NC VetsCorps members had to learn quickly about issues that veterans face and what types of help were available from their host organizations, as well as other community partners. Since members are required to provide direct service, they must learn active listening skills to be able to identify core issues and then triage the issues to develop a realistic plan of action. Many NC VetsCorps members learned how to engage and assist individuals with mental health diagnoses such as Post
Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that, if left untreated, are linked to family violence, homelessness, and suicide.

“Ambivalence is a huge issue in the veteran/military community – as a veteran myself, I can tell you that reaching out for help is not the easiest thing to do, so we have people not picking up the phone when there is a follow up conversation to be had and that creates problems.”

—Stop Soldier Suicide Host Site Supervisor, Shawn Jones

AmeriCorps members themselves may experience economic hardship. The AmeriCorps stipends are not generous, which is by design so that members experience themselves the difficulties of making ends meeting on limited resources. Lead organizations and host sites may supplement stipends, up to a point, but that also raises the costs of sponsoring an AmeriCorps program.

**FOR HOST SITES**

Host sites must devote staff time to training, developing, and supervising AmeriCorps members, which can be a burden for under-resourced organizations. Even though each organization has formally committed to supervising and managing members, devoting this much time to a team member with a service term of less than a year (typical of AmeriCorps programs) can be a problematic cost-benefit calculation, especially when faced with limited staff and urgent client needs. Over the course of NC VetsCorps, some communities saw several host site and partner organizations suffer through budget cuts and staff reductions— that meant more restricted referral networks and discouraging attempts to connect clients with much-needed resources.

**FOR LEAD ORGANIZATIONS**

Lead organizations, especially those new to the AmeriCorps program, may face steep learning curves in implementing the complex system of federal and state compliance requirements, including stipend restrictions and match obligations. In the case of NC VetsCorps, the geographic spread of the host sites and member placements created additional engagement and compliance challenges. MDC addressed these by creating standardized policies and procedures, based on federal and state guidelines, for documentation of recruitment, hiring, performance evaluation, and exiting members.

To support engagement across host sites and members, MDC conducted three in-person trainings for each cohort, supplemented by webinars for new members and new or returning host sites to reinforce AmeriCorps guidelines. Monthly conference calls for both members and host site supervisors provided opportunities for introduction of veteran-related resources and group problem solving. MDC published a regular electronic newsletter for members and host site supervisors and an online discussion site for members facilitated sharing of success stories, in addition to service-related reminders. Interim performance evaluations were conducted via site visits and paired with...
exit interviews at the end of service terms, if possible. These activities were designed to reflect on service and identify opportunities for growth, during and at the conclusion of service terms.

Another challenge that MDC experienced was securing additional funding to be matched against federal government dollars. MDC is very grateful to its philanthropic donors for their support to frame the problem and prepare the federal planning grant applications and for demonstration funding, matched against federal grant dollars, for the three-year program. There is much competition for grant funding for veterans projects. The NCServes initiative, which MDC views as a very positive development for North Carolina, also raised funds that might have otherwise been devoted to NC VetsCorps.

MDC was not able to determine a viable model to scale and sustain NC VetsCorps. MDC pursued an endgame strategy, from its framing and demonstration work, to share knowledge to inform practice and policy—with this report representing a substantial portion of that strategy. As previously mentioned, MDC is exploring offering reasonably priced online training modules to build the capacities of front-line, community-based organizations serving economically vulnerable populations, including veterans and military families. Training could include topics such as integrated services delivery, effective communication skills, and community collaboration.

**Implications for Policy**

NC VetsCorps provides many lessons and strategies for policymakers to consider, particularly in helping to build the elements of an infrastructure of opportunity for veterans and military families. An effective infrastructure requires collaboration and communication between military operations, education providers, and local employers, and adequate training for and communication with institutions serving veterans in crisis, like those that assist with mental health and housing services. The infrastructure needs to be integrated and dynamic, much like a network of power lines and the electric grid, to address the significant challenges facing veterans making the transition to civilian life or trying to reach great economic security and success.

This integration needs to be undergirded by policies that support veterans and military families as they navigate complicated local, state, and federal bureaucracies. Such strategies may include:

- **Expanding access to financial supports.** These supports help individuals and families meet basic needs, build financial stability, offer opportunities for saving and wealth creation, and prevent against predatory pay and lending practices. Improving job quality, including family-sustaining wages, flexible work environments and stable scheduling, and quality dependent care are vital for these families. Communities should ensure that veteran and military families can access the benefits for which they are eligible; this may require legal guidance on upgrading discharge status and consistent support to complete complex VA requirements. **Policymakers** need to consider removing barriers that prevent people from receiving supports.

- **Addressing the intersection of the criminal justice system, housing, and employment.** Veterans with criminal records, sometimes because of pre-military service actions, can gain access to much needed resources by having their criminal records expunged. Providing legal expungement clinics and services gives veterans greater access to both housing and employment. Public funding for legal services organizations, which is under threat or being cut
in many jurisdiction, undercuts the legal services many veterans and military families need on the path to economic security and success.

- **Providing access to trauma and mental health care.** Many veterans face challenges seeking health care, particularly for mental health, PTSD, sexual assault, drug and alcohol addiction, and incidences of domestic violence. Providing clear paths, dismantling cultural taboos, and increasing access to these services have the potential improve every aspect of a veteran’s life and that of their family.

- **Supporting demand-side strategies in the labor market to stimulate job creation and economic growth**, not only with major employers, but also support and promotion of small business development that encourages local entrepreneurs through financing and incubators. This also includes an active role for employers in defining and developing the skills individuals need to be successful in the workforce. For veterans, that means educating employers about the unique skills that veterans bring from military service, as well as helping veterans translate their training into education credits and sought-after job skills.

**Conclusion**

The three-year NC VetsCorps program demonstrated the power of linking legal support and social services, through dedicated efforts to make organizational and individual connections. These connections are integral to address the unique needs of economically vulnerable veterans and military families and the organizations that serve them by formalizing links among organizations across the community, providing support and professional development to service providers within those organizations, and ensuring that veterans can connect to resources and services without getting lost in complicated processes. AmeriCorps members served as a powerful catalyst and force-multiplier for creating such an infrastructure of opportunity in North Carolina communities.

MDC thanks the North Carolina Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service, the Corporation for National and Community Service, The Duke Endowment, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, Wells Fargo, Triangle Community Foundation, Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro, Child Trust Foundation, and Talent Curve for their financial support of NC VetsCorps. MDC thanks its staff for designing, developing, and managing the program and the AmeriCorps members and host sites for developing new models, building capacity, and providing services and resources to improve the lives of economically vulnerable veterans and military families.

**About MDC**

MDC is a nonprofit organization based in Durham, North Carolina that is celebrating its 50th anniversary. MDC partners with foundations, governments, nonprofits, and local communities, particularly in the American South, to close equity gaps that separate people and communities from opportunity.

MDC focuses its work on helping communities design and build what MDC calls an “**infrastructure of opportunity**”—the aligned systems and integrated supports that can boost more people, particularly those who have been left behind, to higher rungs on the economic ladder and to contribute to social vitality and economic prosperity. MDC is especially committed, as an
intermediary organization, to strengthening and supporting the work of front-line community-based organizations across the South—both nonprofit and public—to improve education, employment, and economic security outcomes for low-income households and communities.

For more information about MDC and its programs, including its economic security initiatives and its advisory, training, and technical assistance services, please visit our website at www.mdcinc.org or contact Ralph Gildehaus, MDC Senior Program Director, at rgildehaus@mdcinc.org or (919) 381-5834.

**Endnotes**


