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# AmeriCorps N.H. gets a record \$2.3 million in federal grants

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A few years ago, Ray Stubblefield-Tave was working backstage in a theater. She had never lived outdoors. She didn't know how to pitch a tent.

Now, the 25-year-old spends her days building bridges and restoring trails. And most nights, she camps outside.

Stubblefield-Tave works for AmeriCorps, a network of national and local service programs that receives federal funding to address specific community needs. Members – often young adults – spend up to a year working with local organizations and receive a stipend at the end, which can be used to repay student loans or fund future educational endeavors.

This year, New Hampshire AmeriCorps will receive more than \$2.3 million in federal grants – a record high that will allow the state program to welcome more members, said Gretchen Berger, executive director of Volunteer NH.

Volunteer NH administers the state's AmeriCorps organizations and helps allocate federal funding to ensure the grants are going toward areas of need, Berger said.

"It's not a one-size-fits-all approach for the whole country," she said. "The funding is really meant for members to be able to make an impact on community issues, the most critical local issues."

Stubblefield-Tave and 29 other AmeriCorps members are working for the Student Conservation Association to address New Hampshire's environmental issues – the ones sometimes found in our own backyards, program director Bryan Blankenstein said.

From January to May, SCA New Hampshire volunteers work with local classrooms to provide environmental education to young students. From June to October, they complete hands-on service projects in the White Mountain National Forest, historic sites, state parks and for local conservation commissions.

"Creating the next generation of outdoor leaders is basically what it boils down to – the environmental leaders of tomorrow and today," Blankenstein said.

Stubblefield-Tave and seven of her peers have been working to construct a trail in Grantham that complies with national accessibility guidelines.

"We're putting in a brand new trail from the beginning of the parking lot to a viewing platform on the other side of the stream. . . . It's a place where local people sometimes pull off or take their lunch breaks. And this is going to make it all ADA accessible," Stubblefield-Tave said, referring to the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The group will finish up its project, then meet up with the rest of the SCA group before heading out to a new site with a new small group – which is one of the best parts of the program, AmeriCorps member Chelsea Pardo said.

"You form really strong relationships with all different people here," she said. "I guess that's what happens when you live with them and work with them and get to know every side of them."

Casey Aspell and Jessica Crowley have also grown close while serving in AmeriCorps. But they've had a different kind of experience.

Both are members of the AmeriCorps Victim Assistance Program stationed at the Crisis Center of Central New Hampshire, a Concord-based nonprofit that provides services to victims of domestic violence.

On a given day, Aspell said she could be sent to the court to help a survivor file legal petitions or to a hospital to provide support to someone who was assaulted. The volunteers also help run a shelter for domestic violence victims who need a safe place to live.

"We do a huge mix of things," she said. "You never know what you're going to get yourself into."

The job can be emotionally tiring at times, Crowley said.

"I feel like every day you face some kind of challenge," she said. "Some days it's housing. Some days it's court and judges. Some days it's program funding and availability."

Yet, the two agreed it can also be incredibly rewarding.

"I've learned so much," Aspell said. "I've learned patience, communication skills and just how to be flexible and adapt to any situation."

"Watching them own and take power back from their abuser. And seeing a judge notice that and issue the decision they want – those are the fun days," Crowley added.

In addition to making services and education available to victims of domestic violence and stalking, the AmeriCorps Victim Assistance Program aims to promote "community service and a lifetime commitment to volunteerism," program manager April Aucoin said.

"I love the ability to help young people gain professional skill sets and make a difference," she said. "Because that's really what they're all here for – they want to make a difference."

As of now, Crowley is unsure of what she plans to do when her yearlong program ends in September.

"Hopefully, I'll be working in this field for a couple more years," she said.

Similarly, Stubblefield-Tave and Pardo said after their AmeriCorps experience, they hope to continue working in conservation-related positions.

"I think it's a really interesting and special program because – it sounds so corny – but it totally changed my life and the trajectory I was on," Stubblefield-Tave said.

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