



Don't Let Funding Cuts Destroy Needed Civilian Community Corps

By James Lee Witt

During times of disaster, FEMA enlisted the support of AmeriCorps/NCCC - the National Civilian Community Corps - for dozens of the federally declared disasters and mitigation programs that they managed. As Director of FEMA from 1993-2001, I saw firsthand how the carefully selected and trained men and women of NCCC helped provide safety, protect property, and rebuild communities and lives.

AmeriCorps/NCCC supported local, state, and federal disaster mitigation programs. In the Northwest, they worked tirelessly on FEMA's Project Impact, helping protect communities by reducing the impact of natural disasters. Today, many Northwestern communities are safer from floods and earthquakes as a result of these efforts.

NCCC teams have responded to every major national disaster since its inception in 1994. They proved critical to our disaster response because they provided us with motivated teams trained in first aid, CPR, forest firefighting, and disaster relief, who could be mobilized and deployed from regional bases at a moment's notice.

AmeriCorps/NCCC members worked tirelessly during the Houston floods, when temperatures were unbearable. The people there loved them and couldn't have been more grateful.

While assisting the Governor of Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina, I have once again witnessed NCCC's highly effective, rapid, sustained emergency performance. Since Katrina devastated that region, AmeriCorps/NCCC members have logged more than 600,000 hours of extremely productive service in the Gulf states, under difficult conditions, deploying almost immediately.

In a time when disaster recovery and homeland security are among our nation's highest priorities, AmeriCorps/NCCC is and should remain-- a keeper. But its accomplishments were ignored by federal budget planners, who proposed only enough money in the president's FY 2007 budget to permanently close down the program.

A House of Representatives subcommittee recognizes the value of AmeriCorps/NCCC and has recommended reinstating funding at current levels. I believe it is imperative that this program receive the support of the full House and Senate and I hope others will join me in seeking to persuade the leadership and the administration that their support of NCCC will help with the recovery of people who are affected by disasters.



Time is short. And while funding has been on hold, recruiting, conducting background checks, and training corps members and team leaders is at a standstill. We need funding approved immediately so the new teams set to graduate out of the program can function now.

Senator Cochran of Mississippi, leading a bipartisan effort approved a special, one-time allocation for AmeriCorps/NCCC disaster relief was approved in the Emergency Supplemental Funding Bill passed last week. The support does not go unrecognized. Those funds need to be applied without delay in extending tours of duty for NCCC team members, training new members, and serving our endangered fellow citizens.

As much as any other government program, AmeriCorps/NCCC is supporting both citizenship and security. Every year, more than 1,000 men and women, age 18 to 24, sign up for a year of service through NCCC. NCCC members also lead environmental cleanups, emergency planning, tutoring programs, and other disaster and homeland security projects. AmeriCorps/NCCC provides important support to established national and local groups like Habitat for Humanity and the American Red Cross; in fact, in 2005 the community-based organizations that sponsor NCCC teams gave the program a satisfaction score of 87 on the American Satisfaction Index Survey, the fourth highest score of all federal programs.

Besides the immense community benefits AmeriCorps/NCCC provides the nation, the program has long-lasting impact on the individuals who join. These young men and women become empowered as citizens because they know their presence in society makes a difference. The sense of pride and accomplishment gained from the NCCC program is contagious; it inspires others to dedicate time to serving their communities.

Some opponents of AmeriCorps/NCCC conclude that the initiative is inefficient because it is a residential program. But the residential component is exactly what makes the program work. Its structure allows for highly trained, readily deployable, cohesive teams to be activated quickly and efficiently.

The payback of this program is tremendous. To date, AmeriCorps/NCCC members have completed more than 6,000 projects and logged 18.4 million service hours (valued at \$332 million). They have constructed or renovated 5,500 homes, tutored 319,000 students, assisted 98,000 homeless Americans, and constructed or renovated 7,800 miles of hiking trails. During and after a disaster, when untrained volunteers seek to help their fellow Americans, AmeriCorps/NCCC volunteers are able to manage them, increasing their effectiveness and their ability to make a real difference. In this capacity, they have leveraged 125,000 volunteers.



This outstanding disaster preparedness program must have its funding reinstated. In terms of homeland security, a secure nation requires a prepared citizenry. I urge members of Congress and the administration to save this invaluable program and ensure that allocated funds are used effectively and without delay.

James Lee Witt is the CEO and Chairman of James Lee Witt Associates (JLWA), a public safety and Crisis Management Consulting firm. JLWA is a part of GlobalOptions Group, Inc. Witt was the Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency from 1993 – 2001 and utilized the efforts of AmeriCorps for dozens of the federally declared disasters and mitigation programs he managed.

Contact info:

Kim Fuller for James Lee Witt

202-439-0237 (cell)

kfuller@wittassociates.com

James Lee Witt Associates

701 13th Street, NW Suite 850

Washington DC 20004 Phone - (202) 585-0780

Fax (202) 585-0792

<http://www.wittassociates.com/>