

AmeriCorps Impact Webinar Transcript

Katy Hussey-Sloniker:

Thank you, Janai. I'm Katy Hussey-Sloniker, the Learning Officer for the Office of Research and Evaluation at AmeriCorps. Welcome to the Bridging of Research to Practice Gap with an equitable lens. Today's webinar, we will discuss how data and evidence can be used to inform, enhance AmeriCorps and our partners' efforts to center equity throughout their operations to serve communities effectively and equitably. Our presenters today are Dr. Lily Zandniapour from the Office of Research and Evaluation, AmeriCorps, Dr. Peter Nelson, Vice President of Impact and Innovation at ServeMinnesota, Dr. Anne Sinclair, Learning Officer for Impact, Dr. Sandra Morán Pulles, Vice President of Equity and Inclusion at ServeMinnesota and Nathaniel H. Benjamin, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer at AmeriCorps. There will be plenty of time at the conclusion of the presentations to ask our panelists your questions. Please be sure to place them in the chat. Doctors Jehyra Asencio-Yace and Emily McDonald will be collecting your questions for the Q and A time block towards the end of the webinar. Now, here to welcome us is Dr. Mary Hyde, Director of the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation.

Dr. Mary Hyde:

Thank you Katie and welcome. We are excited for today's webinar. We certainly thank you for choosing to spend time with us today to learn about national service, how we use research and practice to address pressing social issues and how we are integrating an equity lens into all that we do. Thank you, also, to our stellar group of presenters for sharing your expertise and experiences with us today. For those of you who may not be familiar with AmeriCorps, our mission is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. I invite you to learn more about our agency, our strategic plan and our learning agenda by visiting our website@americorps.gov. You will find links to the plan and the learning agenda, which is officially titled, "Strategic Learning and Evidence Building Plan" on our website.

As Katie mentioned, I oversee the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation. Our office sponsors and conducts credible and actionable research on civic engagement and national service programs. For example, we have sponsored the current population survey civic engagement supplement for two decades. We have sponsored the National Service and Civic Engagement Research grant program since 2015. We have conducted an annual exit survey of AmeriCorps members since 2016. We partner with AmeriCorps program offices and grantees to conduct evaluations of their programs. We support the design and implementation of grantees program evaluations through a robust technical assistance and capacity building program. We have developed tools like The SCALER to promote replication of evidence-based service models. All of these activities are undertaken with the ultimate goal of translating research into practice, improving AmeriCorps programs, informing the development of innovative national service solutions and contributing to the public understanding of the power of national service.

The Office of Research and Evaluation strives to leverage the power of evidence and data in service of cultural competency, community building and equity. If you wish to keep current with the work of our office, I encourage you to sign up for updates, which you can do by visiting our [impact page @americorps.gov](#). Our most recent research and evaluation digest was published just yesterday and highlights the long-term benefits of AmeriCorps programs, recent achievements of some of our research grantees and much more. As the director of the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation, I have

had the privilege and pleasure of serving at AmeriCorps for nearly a decade now. I'm a community psychologist by training and this background instilled in me a deep professional and personal commitment to social justice that is grounded in community voice and agency. Democratizing data and ensuring evidence is built and shared in equitable ways are top priorities for AmeriCorps and the Office of Research and Evaluation.

While these goals are certainly aspirational in nature and always a work in progress, today's presenters will demonstrate what is possible. We welcome your engagement and participation in our first research and evaluation webinar of fiscal year 2023. I encourage you to listen to all the webinars in our series, which you can find on our impact page at the website I've mentioned before. With that, I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Lily Zandniapour, who is a manager in the Office of Research and Evaluation here in AmeriCorps, who will provide an overview of AmeriCorps' evidence journey and the critical role of partnerships in creating social justice through national service programs and research. Lily.

Dr. Lily Zandniapour:

Thank you, Mary. Good afternoon, everyone. It is a pleasure to be with you today. As Mary said, I'm just going to give you a little bit of an overview about the evidence journey of AmeriCorps and then talk a bit about our vision for evidence and then pass it on to my esteemed colleagues. If we could go to the next slide, please. As many of you well-known, in 1993, the US Congress passed the National and Community Service Trust Act creating the Corporation for National and Community Service, which we now call, AmeriCorps. That brought all domestic service initiatives under one roof in an independent federal agency. The same year in 1993, government Performance and Results Act of 1993 was also passed. It's really not a coincidence that since its inception, AmeriCorps has used performance measures to report on its efforts. Our grantees and sub-grantees implementing agency supported programs have used evaluations to measure outcomes and gain insights for ongoing improvement.

The passage of the Serve America Act in 2009, however, was an important event in the life of the agency. After the passage of this legislation, AmeriCorps increased its focus on evidence building using rigorous evaluations and began to more intentionally organized and develop an evidence-base for its programs. Since then, investments by AmeriCorps and its grantees have resulted in the development of a very robust base of evidence for a national service solutions. All of the AmeriCorps programs have since increasingly embraced more robust evidence building approaches and practices. For example, AmeriCorps State National, which is the largest program that we administer at AmeriCorps, has incorporated evidence levels, grant applications, go through evidence review in their processing phase. They get additional points assigned for being evidence informed or evidence based. There is formalized evaluation planning and reporting processes and requirements in place, et cetera, et cetera.

Our partners in Minnesota who are going to be speaking today have been really on the frontline of these efforts. They have been leaders in the field of service. They've done the most robust evaluations and studies including impact evaluations using experimental design methodologies, return on investment analysis work. There have been leaders in the field in terms of embracing evidence and using that in their work. We are really excited to have them participate in today's webinar. Next slide please. Another key piece of legislation that has more recently passed and speaks to the importance of measurement and use of evidence in decision making is the Evidence Act of 2018. With this important legislation and through different memoranda that was issued by the Office of Management and Budget, expectations have been communicated for strengthening all federal agencies' capacities to build and use evidence as a way to further ensure good stewardship of public dollars.

Consistent with the requirements of the Evidence Act, AmeriCorps now has a strategic learning agenda in place that Mary also referenced in the beginning. This learning and evidence building plan really

provides a roadmap for generating credible, relevant and actionable information and provides the agency's leadership and staff with the information they need for strategic learning and decision making regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the agency and its programs. Next slide please. We see the evidence building process on a continuum, where you use evaluation and measurement to answer key questions about a particular social intervention. On this visual, you see that on this continuum. Questions in the early phases mainly relate to the program design or what a program does.

Next, you see questions about how well the program is implemented and then there are questions regarding the difference the program makes in terms of its outcomes and impacts. That said, I want to emphasize that evidence building is a much more organic and iterative process, but in a more simplified depiction, as you see on this slide, it really broadly maps to the three areas of inquiry that really informs programming. These are, what are we doing? How well are we doing it? What difference does it make? Please go to the next slide. Evidence building in the national service space really requires partnership. We, at AmeriCorps, are keenly aware of that. It is a partnership with others that we ultimately able to really build evidence for what works for whom and where. We really have this vision that for evidence to really be useful. You really need to partner and you need to be aware of who is getting affected by it and who is doing it.

If we could go to the next slide, please. In this slide, we have just put together a common framework just to mainly highlight that we see ourselves working as a federal agency in this larger ecosystem that really makes up national service. In this AmeriCorps, it's one piece of this ecosystem. Our state service commissions and our match funders, including philanthropy and community members, are also key parts of this system. We wouldn't be able to do our work without their participation. The nonprofits implementing programs on the ground in the six or seven focus areas that are identified in the Serve America Act or AmeriCorps are at the heart of this work. Organizations that implement service solutions really are the ones that connect members and volunteers to communities across the country. Partnership with the community is our through line, really.

If we could go to the next slide please. Now that we are coming out of the challenging past few years with COVID, we, at AmeriCorps, are really focused on expanding our footprinting communities. Particularly those that have been underserved and using evidence to advance diversity, equity and inclusion goals, which is an important mandate of President Biden's administration as well. I think this quote from Maya Angelou is very apt and on point that basically says, "Do the best you can until you know better and when you know better, do better." I think it speaks to the really openness of mind and commitment to learning that is needed if you really want to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in a really meaningful way.

ServeMinnesota and Ampact who are going to be speaking next are in full alignment with AmeriCorps in relying on evidence-based practice for advancing their goals and for using an equity lens to ensure diversity, inclusion and meaningful partnership with communities. What is striking about them is that they are both innovators and early adopters. We feel really privileged to have them be on this panel with us. I will now turn it over to Dr. Peter Nelson, the Vice President of Impact and Innovation at ServeMinnesota to talk about the national science and service collaborative model. Pete.

Dr. Peter Nelson:

All right. Hi, everyone. My name is Peter Nelson. I'm the VP of Impact and Innovation at ServeMinnesota. I'm going to share about how we think about research to practice in the context of AmeriCorps. If you go to the next slide, I think it's good context to say outright that we believe AmeriCorps is, I think, more than any other institution uniquely positioned as a lever for advancing research, for advancing practice and the relationship between the two. I think this is an important thing

to recognize because for a variety of reasons, research and practice are not always aligned. On the next slide, I just want to talk a little bit about... It's a two-way problem where it's often difficult for practitioners and community members to access the body of research knowledge in a given area. Things like paywalls for content and a lack of a plan for sustainability, and so did the academic setting for a research project to then, after the timeline of the funded project to have it actually live on in practice can make it hard for research to find its way into practice.

It can also, on the other side, be difficult for community members and those doing this real work to see their learnings, their expertise and needs reflected in research projects. I think we can really shine a light on the potentially impactful role that AmeriCorps does and could continue to play in addressing some of those obstacles. There are, at least, three ways that we can do that. They serve a guidepost for us in our work with AmeriCorps program. We think about program development in the same token, grant making and partnership. First, I think we can advance research to practice through grant making, through program design efforts by accessing that body of research within a given area and ensuring that it informs new programming and continuous improvement efforts for existing programs. One pathway is that we can drive that by accessing it and infusing that into our programming.

Second, we can support programs to build good data infrastructure around their theory of change, which is just... It's objectively a good thing around AmeriCorps program design that we're checking some of those assumptions that Lily mentioned those key questions when it comes to a logic model for a program, but in doing so, we not only create opportunities to learn about and improve our AmeriCorps programs, but essentially, we create this real deal research opportunity. It's almost unparalleled. There's space here for us to conduct our own work or work in collaboration with the community or the researchers that both improves AmeriCorps programming and advances the broader research literature, the broader understanding of evidence-based practices. I think, perhaps most importantly, by their very nature America programs are positioned in the community, right? We're, therefore, positioned to draw from that deep expertise that exists in the communities that we serve.

Certainly, for program design and improvement, but also in defining what improvement means in a given context so that the metrics we're looking at are meaningful to the communities that we're serving and then using that information to support the design and implementation of research and evaluation projects that reflect multiple perspectives, not just a single perspective. Three ways that AmeriCorps is uniquely positioned, right? We can translate existing ideas that might not, otherwise, find their way into practice because they live in the... wherever all the research literature is, right? In the practice to research vein, we can leverage this AmeriCorps infrastructure to guide the literature on evidence-based practices and then we can give voice to the robust learnings inherent in the communities that we serve. This really unique opportunity that is, in many ways, I think unique to AmeriCorps in terms of a positioning to do each of these things.

I want to give a couple examples that help illustrate how we try to realize some of that potential in the areas of research to practice, practice to research and then later, we'll hear from Sandy who's been close to a lot of interesting work, specifically focused on community voice and thinking about equity. What does that mean for us in terms of program design? What does that look like? What does it look like when we think about research projects or continuous improvement projects? What does it mean to collaborate not just with researchers but with the community? As an example of something in the research practice, you go to the next slide. Also, as a preview of the program development process that Anne will talk a bit more too. I want to use a recent change to the early learning core program model, which is formally known as Pre-K Reading Corps.

The context here, as the name suggests, is that we have worked with Ampact to identify this need to expand our Pre-K Reading Corps to include early math concepts. We were fortunate enough to also find

a private funder to support of a multi-year development process for that pre-K math programming. If you think about the importance of translating research into practice in ensuring that community voice is reflected in a project like that, that timeline is ideal because it can allow for the planning and development work that needs to happen and also, the iteration that needs to happen early on in the program life where you're creating these feedback loops between the data that's coming in. There's data feedback loops, but there's also qualitative feedback loops where we're talking to people who are closest to the program to get a sense of where the compromise is between of rigid, typically rigid research specifications for programming and the reality of implementation.

I'll focus just on the first year. In the first year for us, I was largely focused on content development and specifying that theory of change, which when we think about research to practice was informed by a literature review on our part. Looking at what does good early math content look like? What should it focus on? Conversations with researchers, with practitioners. So teachers, parents, the student themselves. This all informed the design of the program in terms of content. Not just, well, math, but what specifically about math in the pre-K context and then what kind of activities should members be engaged in, but also, the broader implementation infrastructure for the program. At the final, the tail end of that, just piloting just those materials. Not of an embedded literacy math, but just focus on the math materials, getting feedback on those. In year two, we were able to pilot the full year of the program.

Now examining not just the math materials but the way in which literacy and math might work together for the same tutor in classroom. It's not always this way, but in this case, we were able to roll out those revisions with a subset of sites which allowed the program to do some meaningful comparison between the business as usual Pre-K Reading Corps program and the math literacy combo. So then we had that feedback loop, that quantitative feedback loop, which was helpful. It's important aspect of program design, but it was really that the feedback loop teachers, members and kids actually watching the program in action and those things, especially early in the stage of development and piloting, really help move the program from a list of best practices into which, again, can feel very rigid, are very rigid, into something that feels a little bit more real and meaningful and reflective of what the community needs are, what the local community needs are, what the local site partner needs are while still retaining a lot of the aspects of the underlying evidence-based principles of the math programming.

I think new programming and continuous improvement is one way. It's one way that AmeriCorps can help bridge this research to practice gap, but before I finish, I want to provide an example, not only how research can inform AmeriCorps, but how we, as AmeriCorps programs or commissions that are supporting America programs, are positioned to inform the research literature, which is not something that we talk about a lot. To that end, I'm going to go to the next slide and I'll focus on a continuous improvement project in the context of Reading Corps. The picture here is at Reading Corps. It's an AmeriCorps tutoring program for kids in grades K to three. It's a program that has strong evidence. It has RCT support across time and geography, but in our annual evaluation work with the program, which primarily focuses on continuous improvements, I'm on that second line there in the slide, we were observing that many kids who graduate from Reading Corps midyear were regressing once tutoring support was removed. They're getting that grade level. We visit them at the end of the year, they were back flagged for additional support.

This became a key focus for the program in terms of continuous improvement, but also, we knew that this issue of post intervention aggression was not something that was really discussed much in the research literature. That is student growth after leading intervention was largely ignored, but what we were seeing suggested that, "Hey, we should be maybe paying closer attention to this, quantifying this, understanding it more." Because Reading Corps has this robust data infrastructure, we were positioned to and felt some degree of responsibility to publish some of these preliminary findings and later publish

results from our efforts to mitigate post intervention regression. I guess what's so exciting to me here is that I think that this research itself is interesting to me, but I think it's more interesting to think about the opportunity here and that I think it sheds light on where continuous improvement efforts that we engage and how well-positioned we are to not only advance the quality of our America programs through building good data infrastructure through authentic continuous improvement efforts, but we're positioned to advance the broader narrative of evidence-based practices.

In this case, it's not just about improving what we know about Reading Corps, improving that particular program, but also, improving what the field understands about tier two or supplemental reading or dimension more generally. I think we can talk about that across issue areas. It's not just education where AmeriCorps can be a real player in advancing the narrative about what evidence-based practices look like in these different areas. I'll stop there for today. I'm going to turn over to Anne who's really provided some excellent leadership around what program design and continuous improvement looks like at Impact.

Dr. Anne Sinclair:

Thanks, Pete. I'm Anne Sinclair. I'll talk a little bit about how our organization has started using tools that AmeriCorps provides to support the implementation and scaling of programs that are informed by research as well as community partnerships and practice. Next slide. Ampact is a non-profit based in Minnesota that administer several AmeriCorps programs in three general areas. Education, environment and healthy futures in more than a dozen states and Washington DC. We consult with ServeMinnesota as we implement programs that are in various stages of development. Some of our programs have been around for almost 20 years. Others are brand new and in their first year of implementation.

Next line. We use AmeriCorps tools and definitions to situate our programs on a continuum of evidence as we evaluate their readiness for scale. I love this graphic from AmeriCorps because as Lily said earlier, this process is not always linear throughout the stages of program and implementation. We're always reconsidering where we are on this continuum and what other community input we need to guide our implementation. We collaborate with ServeMinnesota on those programs that are in their infancy that are just developing a theory of change and on programs that have been implemented for two decades, like Reading Corps, our largest tutoring program.

Next slide please. AmeriCorps provides a lot of great resources and tools for evaluating programs readiness for scale, including the SCALER tool. Recently, we brought together all of the Ampact directors of programs across our impact areas for a work session to apply these principles of evidence building and scaling to programs that are in various stages of development. One of the tools that we used was the SCALER checklist that helps to evaluate readiness for scale and to figure out where you are on that evidence continuum. Next slide. ServeMinnesota and Ampact have also layered on that AmeriCorps SCALER tool onto the map of program development and implementation that Pete laid out earlier. This serves as a communication tool between the two organizations and a self-evaluation tool for directors of programs who are guiding day-to-day implementation decisions.

We regularly ask the Ampact directors of programs like Reading Corps, Recovery Corps, Math Corps to evaluate where their program is on the continuum of evidence to use the SCALER tool to apply principles of effective scaling and ongoing program improvement. We brought them together this summer for an initial look at their programs and the way in which daily implementation maps onto their grant narratives in the SLCAER tool. We're bringing them together again next month to focus on training, specifically, as it relates to elements of that SCALER checklist, and how we're embedding tools for engaging the community members who serve with us. I'll take a minute to walk through a couple of examples of how we evaluate our programs using the SCALER tool.

Next slide. Recovery Corps is a relatively new program at Ampact that provides peer support to people in recovery. Recovery Corps navigators have lived experience in recovery and are trained to meet with participants to overcome barriers to sustainable recovery and build recovery capital. Next slide. On the AmeriCorps continuum of Evidence Building, Recovery Corps is somewhere in the middle. We have a few years of outcome measurement collected. We're laying the groundwork for future impact evaluations. Next slide. As you can see in this slide, we've got some descriptive data to show that participants who are working with Recovery Corps navigators are increasing their recovery capital. Even though we're starting to build evidence of impact, there are components of implementation that we're still trying to figure out to make sure that there's effective implementation. For example, if the director of Recovery Corps at Ampact is currently wrestling in collaboration with partners at ServeMinnesota, but the best way to measure fidelity to the program, which is a major component of the SCALER checklist for evaluating a program's readiness for scale and figuring out which components of the program are most important for getting impact.

We're also working on aligning the member training with the service activities that yield the greatest outcomes. Next slide. I won't belabor this point too much because Pete spoke to this a little bit. Reading Corps is our largest tutoring program. We train members to deliver evidence-based reading interventions to students in grades K through three who haven't yet reached grade level targets and foundational reading skills. It's a longstanding program with a well-established evidence base, but even though it's well established and has longstanding protocols for collecting fidelity data and ensuring effective implementation of programming, the director of that program still uses the SCALER tool and principles of implementation science to guide consultation with ServeMinnesota and innovations to that program, including feedback from the field and what is happening in practice.

Next slide. In practice, we started to notice a pattern in Reading Corps implementation data where intervention changes were actually leading to decreases in student growth. Given those data and current research on best practice and the application of response to intervention, the program made a change to the way that coaches in the program make intervention change decisions. We are hoping that that change impact student outcomes in a positive way. We are also curious about the impact of delivering Reading Corps interventions to pairs of students instead of one-on-one, which was a suggestion that came from the field. We piloted a PAIRS program and ServeMinnesota helped us to evaluate it. We found no significant differences in student growth or students serve in pairs to one-on-one. We can quickly implement that program innovation on a broad scale.

In short, we use the AmeriCorps resources to continually review our programs with a quality impact and implementation goals in mind. Though our programs are in different stages of development, using the SCALER tool allows us to engage in a cycle of continuous improvement no matter where they are on that continuum. I'm going to hand it over now to my colleague at ServeMinnesota, Dr. Sandra Morán Pulles, who will talk more about embedding equity and community engagement in the design and implementation process.

Dr. Sandra Morán Pulles:

Great. Thank you, Anne and thank you everyone. Happy to be here. My name is Sandra Morán Pulles. I am the VP of Equity Inclusion at ServeMinnesota. I'm excited to be here today to talk about how we embed equity and community engagement across our AmeriCorps programs from the design to the implementation within our existing programs. I'm fortunate to be at ServeMinnesota where we have this creative space to think about, not only how we design programs, but how we intentionally work with community members to be a part of that design as well as the evaluation of the program. Next slide. Before I get any further, I just want to start with a basic definition of equity that we use at

ServeMinnesota, which is the elimination of barriers to full participation in the process as well as the access to the full benefits of the outcomes.

I'm going to be talking a little bit about community engagement, what that looks like for us. For us, community engagement is referring to community members who identify as those who have been directly impacted by our AmeriCorps programs. For example, in our education programs like the tutoring programs, we're talking about students, other staff or even caregivers who have direct impact by the program. Keep that in mind as we move forward. Next slide. In order to do this, we really center our equity work across four key pillars. One is focusing on what we do at the commission at ServeMinnesota, both across our staff and our board. The second area is really understanding the efforts that we take with recruitment and retention. In particular, strategies for members who identify as members of color or indigenous backgrounds as well as thinking proactively about career development opportunities and ensuring that AmeriCorps members align with service experience.

Lastly, thinking about how we conduct research and innovation with the focus on continuous improvement by proactively embedding community members voice perspective and experiences throughout this process. I'm going to spend some time now digging into these four areas. Next slide. Starting with the commission initiatives, we really find it integral that this is our foundational point that we start with our own commission, our own staff and our own board to create and center equity across the work that we do. A couple years ago, we launched a board committee, the Racial Equity Inclusion board committee that really centers on identifying areas for improvement and identifying areas of success within our communities that we serve and identifying new opportunities to leverage partnerships or to continue to uplift what some of our community members are doing and align with our work.

We also really focus on building staff capacity within our organization, working with external consultants who are familiar with the AmeriCorps world and experience ensuring that the decisions that we make as staff at ServeMinnesota are proactively embedding equity and thinking about the communities that are directly impacted by our work. We also see important to train and support our AmeriCorps programs in these same skill sets. So ensuring that we're not just focusing on ourselves, but focusing on the communities and programs that are directly working with communities on having those skills. Then community engagement, which is a huge topic area. It's one little bullet point, but I'll give some specific examples of how we engage with community members throughout this process.

Next slide please. Recruitment and retention, for us, really go hand in hand, right? We see the importance of recruiting a diverse group of AmeriCorps members to serve in our programs and also, ensuring that there's this really thriving experience that they have while serving. We've implemented a couple different strategies and I'm just going to run through those. Many of these actually emerge from AmeriCorps members of color themselves. We did focus groups a couple years ago hearing directly from AmeriCorps members themselves about their experiences while serving in our programs and while many of them shared some positive experiences that they had. They also talked about areas that we as a commission can do to support them. Things like launching affinity groups so they have a safe space to connect with, having a robust alumni network that they can connect with during their service. Post service, they have additional opportunities.

They, of course, talked about financial support. We were able to also launch an emergency fund or a member financial assistance fund to support with unexpected expenses that might impact retention. Then also, just continue to build connections with racially diverse organizations in our community and even across the country and understanding what are some effective strategies that other commissions or other communities even are embracing. Next slide. Career development opportunities is another key piece. We really see the AmeriCorps experience as an opportunity to launch AmeriCorps members into

their next field, whatever stage they may be. In order to do this by centering equity, we really are interested in tracking member demographic data as well as aligning. That's with career goals and outcomes. This current program year, we just launched a member survey to really understand who are our members and what their interests are, specifically with career goals to be able to create outcomes. From there, we are working to align member training to industry skills and standards to ensure that their AmeriCorps service it, which we know is meaningful, can be in alignment with current skills that are needed outside of the AmeriCorps space.

Some of our programs have been able to provide individualized career counseling that meets AmeriCorps member specific needs as well as creating intentional skill building opportunities during their service experience. We've also been identifying unique opportunities to create specific pathways through certification or credential, degree opportunities at little to no cost to members. That looks like partnering with higher ed institutions or other training institutions to really find opportunities that are in direct alignment with member service experience. When they leave their AmeriCorps experience, they can take those skills along with them into a certification or credential experience. Of course, we're working at building career placement opportunities for members post service.

Next slide. Now, the last area that I'm going to talk about is research and innovation, which is key as you heard from our previous speakers. This has been a shift for us of really embedding community voice. Again, those who are in direct service of the AmeriCorps programming to be able to have a voice in how our programs operate and how our programs can improve. We've really been shifting that narrative by engaging community members to not only just share what they think is important, but also, be a part of the co-creation of research projects so that we are working with community members to identify new solutions rather than creating solutions for community members. And I'll give an example of that on the next slide please.

One of our programs, Math Corps, which is a program that is a part of Anne's organization, we had heard directly from school caregivers that they wanted to have more of an awareness of what was happening during the tutoring lesson that their student was in, receiving tutoring from an AmeriCorps tutor and they wanted to have more insight of what actually was happening, how they could support their student at home. We were able to consult with a school staff member, a paraprofessional who had the experience of seeing our program in action and also had students of her own, her own children who had received our services. She was interested in, also, making this come to reality. She works with other caregivers and obviously, as friends with other caregivers in the community and knew some of the students who were in the program and wanted other caregivers to have the same access to seeing what was happening in the AmeriCorps program that she did. We worked with her. She was a part of our research team. We compensated her. We co-created questions with her.

Instead of us designing what types of questions we want to ask the community, we worked with her to identify what types of questions we should ask. When we actually engaged in focus groups and interviews, she was the leader on that. It wasn't just us asking the questions. It was us listening as the community expert was providing insight and asking questions in a way that really wouldn't cause harm to the caregivers that were participating in the group. We also compensated those who participated in the focus group and recognizing that the insights that the community members share is just as valuable as other research content that we might secure from working with other external researchers. We want to send that message clear that we really value community members, their expertise.

Throughout this entire process, we were able to develop an app prototype. This app prototype emerged from the caregivers, the entire design where they provided insight on what they thought would be a great way to share communication with how their student was doing in tutoring. It was a really cool project that I was really proud to be a part of and happy to have the chance to connect with community

members in a different way to have them shape something under their perspective from what they thought was the best way for them to receive information instead of us trying to decide what we think would be best for community. That's an example of a type of research and innovation work that we're really trying to do, centering community voice, centering their lived experiences to really change how we do research and innovation at ServeMinnesota.

Next slide. Just the final point here that I really, again, want to share is that we are focused on really changing the narrative of what national service looks like. Especially with our research and innovation work and really thinking critically about how we can create and embed more accessible opportunities that allow members to thrive during and after their service experience as well as supporting all of our AmeriCorps programs to ensure that they have created inclusive spaces that affirm members identities for them to thrive as well. With that, I believe that's my last slide. I'll hand it over to AmeriCorps Chief Diversity Inclusion Officer. Thank you.

Nathaniel H. Benjamin:

Thank you. What incredible messages from our esteem partners and colleagues which are rooted in evidence-based data. The importance of research and data cannot be emphasized enough. As the nation's largest grant maker for service and volunteerism, access to complete and timely data helps our agency to understand gaps in our funding. Lack of representation in our core and ultimately, how to best direct resources to support underserving communities. Expanding our footprint with an equitable lens requires the capability of tracking progress, replicating what works and understanding what does not. As we work to cultivate and implement solutions to advance equity, we must continue to use data and partner with communities so that data collection is both accurate and relevant all the way down to the community level.

Advancing equity in our grant making and ensuring that our members are reflective of all aspects of society, particularly of the communities we serve, is not only a priority of our agency, but is also our commitment. That's why we have invested heavily in the DEIA, which is diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility infrastructure and staffing with the appointment of our first CDIO, the establishment of the DEIA office and the launch of the ODEIA strategic roadmap, which tracks the DEIA work of the organization through accountability, targets, measures and outcomes. We have also invested in training, research data and will continue to do so. Now, we know that the first step in advancing equity is being a data driven and centered organization. It's knowing who our members are and where they are serving. It's understanding the barriers to entry and retention for both our resources and our programs. It's replicating strong program models that have equity at the forefront.

We have made many strides in this area. Today's conversation is evidence of that, but there is more to be done and I'm proud to be amongst a strong group of leaders and partners who share the same vision and commitment and who are serving this effort. Authentic community partnerships do not happen without the buy-in and participation of our partners with a special emphasis on our state national partners because they are on the ground. They plant the seeds, they water them, they cultivate them and are instrumental to the harvest of national service and volunteerism. Commissions are crucial when it comes to helping AmeriCorps promote equitable grant making and recruit and retain a diverse core. The role of the commission plays as engaging communities, bringing organizations to the table and equipping them with the capacity for building resources, collaboration opportunities, providing oversight and represents a vital aspect of creating inclusive spaces. They represent an essential part of the narrative. Therefore, a key component in changing it.

Coupled with research efforts of our colleagues and the Office of Research and Evaluation, our state and national projects have demonstrated and will continue to validate an effective collaboration that will

embed equity and inclusive practices from the design to the evaluation of our work. Again, we are partners in this work. Data is our anchor with targets, measures and outcomes that are focused on organizational success. Thank you.

Dr. Jehyra Asencio-Yace:

Hi, everyone. Thank you so much. My name is Jehyra Asencio. I am with the Office of Research and Evaluation. Thank you, Nate, for your questions.

Dr. Emily McDonald:

Hi, I'm Emily McDonald. I'm also with the Office of Research and Evaluation serving as a research analyst. Our first question that we wanted to ask, we have some great examples of definitions of equity from Sandra. Someone asked, how is AmeriCorps generally defining equity and how are we defining equitable research? Maybe the equity question, Nate, could you speak to that?

Nathaniel H. Benjamin:

Absolutely. AmeriCorps is defining equity following the definition from the White House. If you all are familiar, there was an executive order that was administered within the first few weeks of the new administration and that was Executive Order 13985, which is advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities through the federal government. AmeriCorps' definition is the same as the White House's definition, which means the consistent and systematic fair, just an impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment such as black, Latino, indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color, members of religious minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer persons, persons with disabilities, persons who live in rural areas and those, otherwise, adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.

Dr. Emily McDonald:

Thank you, Nate. Maybe Lily or Mary, would you like to speak to how AmeriCorps is defining equitable research?

Dr. Lily Zandniapour:

I can just start by saying that we are sensitive to the process of evidence building who we are collecting data from, what for, for what communities and so I think, I would say, applying principles of equity in research starts by initially questioning assumptions and all the predetermined areas that we don't normally is not part of our cognitive thinking and approach in doing research. Questioning that, being sensitive to the power differential that exists in the communities, making sure that voices, and I'm going back now to what Sandra was saying about incorporating the voices of the communities that are involved in a research endeavor, bringing that voice in, ensuring that you're not doing harm, you're incorporating the voices, you're making sure that the solutions that you are proposing, the evidence you are developing is responsive to their situation and condition and making sure that it really produces results and solutions that really feed back into that and helps them improve their situation for that evidence to be useful.

I think it comes with a heightened sense of awareness, significant questioning of one's approach, one's assumptions and so forth and then ensuring that what you conclude, inferences you make, interpretations and solutions you offer have the impact that you want them to have on those

communities. I think being... It's a learning process. I would never say that we have mastered this. This is an ongoing thing that requires constant check and balance internally.

Dr. Jehyra Asencio-Yace:

Thank you so much Lilly and Nate. We have a lot of interesting and lengthy questions. If the hosts could just confirm how much time we have left so we can try and field as much as possible. Another of the questions that was sent beforehand was, if you all had any recommendations on classes or certificate programs for professionals interested in gaining expertise in this area of equity and equitable research? Maybe Anne, Lily, Nate, do you want to take a-

Dr. Lily Zandniapour:

I can just say that I would refer folks to the American Evaluation Association. It has a task force that focuses on equity and research. There are principles that are put forth by the American Evaluation Association around this issue. There are topical interest groups, there are courses, there are resources available that speak to this. I would definitely refer to the professional association of researchers that are engaged in this work.

Dr. Peter Nelson:

We are, at Serve, sending five or six folks to AEN this year. The two days prior to the conference, there's 65 workshops and they're diverse. You can get anything from quantitative methods to really engaging in equity-based evaluations. We were particularly interested in a lot of qualitative work. This year, there's a ton of qualitative training sessions. Those are great opportunities. I just wanted to second that as a good resource.

Dr. Emily McDonald:

Great. Thank you all so much. Sandra, this question came through while you were speaking, but anyone, feel free to jump in. To the point of career development, what has your experience been with the 80-20 rule or other regulations that may limit the amount of time or resources that can be dedicated to career or credentialing pathways?

Dr. Sandra Morán Pulles:

Yeah, that's a great question. One that we are often looking for creative solutions around, but really been working closely with our programs to identify, are there specific courses that are in direct alignment with member service experience that could still count without surpassing the training cap? It's one that we continue to work on but really have been trying to find creative solutions to move around that, I guess, but yeah, I don't know if others want to jump in. Anne?

Dr. Anne Sinclair:

I don't think I have anything with that.

Dr. Jehyra Asencio-Yace:

Great. I think our next question is for Ampact. If Ampact is using an evidence-based reading program and training their volunteers to work with children to improve reading skills, wouldn't other AmeriCorps funder programs also working to improve students reading skills benefit from access to this training? This particular participant said, "I have had to take a lot of time to research effective reading tutoring

practices and to find professionals able to provide training for our volunteers in the eight counties with Serve."

Dr. Anne Sinclair:

Yeah, that's a tough one. I think what I would say is that it's not just the intervention that we think of as the evidence-based practice. It is a package of an intervention, the implementation of that intervention, coaching for... robust coaching and training for the individuals who are delivering the intervention. It's not as easy as just passing on a script, that it's more robust than that. Those are my initial thoughts. Sandy or Pete, would you have anything else to add to that?

Dr. Peter Nelson:

Well, you could just adopt Reading Corps. No, I think you can also take hard in the fact that I do think that there are these principles of good program design and good implementation support. There's these principles in the context of academic settings, in particular, that are good evidence-based principles, right? Feedback like the immediacy of feedback that kids are getting, opportunities for practice that they have. You can think about these as general principles and then adapt those principles to the local community in the end. I don't think it's not always necessary to say, "I need this off the shelf solution." You can take in this information and then design a program that it's a little better or more meaningful fit in the local community. Yeah, this is one thing I wanted to recognize as well. I think that a lot of evidence based reading and math programs share a lot of the same root principles for implementation. They're just different manifestations of those.

Dr. Sandra Morán Pulles:

I was just going to jump in, actually, to add something to the previous question about the 80-20 rule. I just was thinking about and that one thing that we have done is share position descriptions with higher ed institutions to see if higher ed institutions can provide credit for prior learning as a way to put money back in the pocket of a member, I guess. They don't have to take certain classes if they've demonstrated that they've been doing those types of skills. An example might be like, there might be a specific course on engaging with students from racially diverse backgrounds. If that is a part of their experience that they did in AmeriCorps, we've shared that position description to say, "Hey, this person has already done this for a year or however long in their service experience to get credit for prior learning."

Dr. Jehyra Asencio-Yace:

Thank you all. There was also a second part to this question that said, "I also struggle when there are three AmeriCorps programs in my area all trying to secure service stations for their volunteers." They all provide similar services, especially when some of the programs have stricter eligibility requirements and procedures. This is where, I think, the coordination could be significantly improved. I think I could answer a little bit of that and say, we totally agree. I think there is a lot of space for us to improve in terms of putting programs together to work and foster this communities of practice and better coordinate services and specific areas, localities and regions. I think with the new structure of the region, the office of regional operations, we can definitely take that feedback to our programs, our regional operations staff and think about better ways of improving coordination to provide services. We have seven minutes left and a couple of more questions. Emily, do you want to take the next one?

Dr. Emily McDonald:

Yeah. The next one asked, the example of equitable research really seemed to focus on continuous improvement, not on impact evaluations, are there thoughts from the panel about increasing equity and impact evaluations and how that might be demonstrated?

Dr. Peter Nelson:

Yeah, so I can share... For one, I don't really see equity and experimental evaluation is at odds with one another. I think they can work together, right? You can build a program that's built in community partnership and then you should be, I think, motivated to understand whether or not that program works. I think making... ensuring that that program works, it is in the interest of equity and then making that accessible widely is in the interest of equity. I think we focus on continuous improvement a lot because that's where I think where the most interesting stuff is. At an impact evaluation, the bare minimum, you need it, right? You need to demonstrate impact. What is it telling you, right? It's telling you overall, this was the impact of the program and does it work or not? It's baseline.

The more interesting work in the work that is more in line with an equity lens is understanding and really, how to align in one of our slides earlier, understanding when the program works, under what condition is in front, right? Understanding not just these overall mean values but the variance in those. That is what really then drives the continuous improvement process. Impact evaluations, yes, they're about getting an impact number, but more importantly, they're about setting forth a series of research questions that you might have about continuous improvement. Because what you're seeing in that impact evaluation is generating you to think, "Wow, this pocket of students or this geographic area, there was something else going on there." Being, hopefully, self-critical enough to not assume that it's something wrong with those people, something wrong with those sites and that it could be a need to have the program be more adaptable.

I think that's the way that, at least, I'm thinking about equity when it comes to your traditional impact evaluation. Noting as well that when you design these, you can work with your partners and your community partners to think about what are the metrics that are of most interest. You don't like your performance measures. Those don't need to be the key measure in an evaluation. You can identify other measures that are important in the community to include in your impact evaluation to give you that insight for continuous improvement purposes.

Dr. Sandra Morán Pulles:

Yeah, I would add on too that I see community members play an integral part in the design of that impact evaluation process. Helping design, what data are we collecting, how are we collecting, what questions are we asking, what's important to the community and how are we capturing that in an evaluation and working with community members to define those outcomes instead of trying to think about what we think is important, moving beyond standardized assessments, moving beyond existing outcomes that we typically look at that are driven by community members in partnership and while compensating them, of course.

Dr. Jehyra Asencio-Yace:

Thank you. Lily, did you want to say something? I thin I-

Dr. Lily Zandniapour:

Just to have... Even if you think about the traditional methodology for research, I think it's really important just as both Pete and Sandy were saying, to really look at the impact of the program on the subgroups of folks that are part of the study. Sometimes those subgroups are minorities, racial and

ethnic minorities, other types of groups that are not makeup majority of the folks. Making sure that when you produce evidence of impact that it really speaks to those communities as well that you're pulling that data out and making sure that there is that effect there. If not, why? This gets you right back at the beginning of whether or not you have enough sample, for example, from groups that you want to look at.

You have to go back to your research design and make sure that there is this process where you're constantly thinking about the information you're producing and is it really capturing information for all groups that you're interested in? Is it really speaking to the effect of the program and the quality of the program or what have you. Just looking at those components more carefully and making sure that you are sensitive to what that means and then go back and revisit.

Dr. Peter Nelson:

Yeah, that point about who was involved in it. An impact evaluation made that out, typically, right? It's not going to be the entire program. So then who are your partners? Well, sometimes the partners for an impact evaluation might not be representative of the intended or the overall recipients of the program, right? It might be, well, it just happened to be that these schools were predominantly white, more affluent schools. Well, that's problematic, right? Because that's going to tell you the impact in those schools, but it's difficult to say. You can't say, "Well, our program is impactful. Our program is impactful in these sites with these students, in these contexts." Understanding who your intended service recipients are and then having that reflected in your impact evaluation is another key piece that I'll just underline there that Lily mentioned.

Dr. Jehyra Asencio-Yace:

Thank you so much, Peter, Sandy and Lily for that amazing response. We're a bit of time. I will just read one more questions for the ones that was posted in the chat. "I would like to know how we can better access existing program evaluations and program designs. The current agency tools for this evidence exchange, for example, are very limited. You can't keyword search and I believe the content is not even up to date. If we want smaller programs or smaller organizations to utilize research findings and evidence, I'd love to see made more accessible." I think this is a question we could not agree more. This is something that we really feel and have very strong feelings and are working towards in many fronts on the Office of Research and Evaluation. We know that the evidence exchange has some limitations when you're trying to search.

I can say, we do constantly update. You can find reports that are very up-to-date and you can search, I think, by year. We do have a couple of vehicles that we are using to improve and enhance our website and the way we share publicly a lot of our resources. We also have working with our partners at NORC, which provide a lot of the technical assistance to state commissions and sub-grantees around evidence building and their evaluation plans. We're working on two specific projects. We're doing some focus groups and doing some stakeholder engagement to get input on our organizational capacity assessment tool and also, our SCALER tool, which is a series of checklist that help you assess your readiness for scaling, expanding or replicating one of your programs. We have various initiatives on the way that we hope and would really like to be made more accessible. We are also open to hearing more specific details if you all think of specific things that we could do to make this evidence and resources more accessible for you all.

We will leave our emails in the chat to also connect with you if you find that it's best. It looks like we still have three minutes. Before we wrap it up and hand it back to our hosts, is there anything else that you want to comment? Nate, Lilly, Peter?

Dr. Peter Nelson:

Just to what you were talking about there. I think it would be really useful, too, to see process assessment stuff. Not just the impact, but how are programs being implemented? What are... Let's get another details, right, because I think those are the questions that people have. It's like, "How exactly does this work?" I get it. You do this thing and then it has these outcomes and you have evidence, but how does that work on it? What is the daily life of that member? What is your... How are you collecting data? What systems are you using? You can start to get at some of that information with the process assessment. I don't know if... I'm just mostly noting that that would be really interesting to me and potentially other people. I don't know exactly how to best accomplish that, but I just wanted to note it.

Dr. Jehyra Asencio-Yace:

Yes, and we don't have a lot of time, but I think we are doing that with our life cycle evaluation projects. I put some information in the chat. We have three bundles going on. They are all three demonstrative projects looking at how these programs have been implemented. We will maybe have to do another webinar about that. Any other thoughts from our panelists?

Dr. Lily Zandniapour:

I would just acknowledge that that's a very valuable resources to have. Really, it's a question of resources and staffing to be able to make sure that those types of information are available. Right now, really, our focus is around the resources, mostly, for evidence building and tools. Also, on the studies that are more rigorous designs and so forth to show impact, but hopefully, we can expand and take more of those process evaluations into that fold, which are useful for folks.

Dr. Jehyra Asencio-Yace:

Well, thank you so much. Emily and I really appreciated all your thoughtful comments, participation in the chat and the responses from the panelists. We hope to see you soon again. Final slide please.

Katy Hussey-Sloniker:

We're now at the close of our webinar. We'd like to thank Dr. Zandniapour, Dr. Nelson, Dr. Sinclair, Dr. Morán Pulles, Mr. Benjamin, Dr. Asencio-Yace and Dr. McDonald for their presentations and thoughts on this topic, and to our audience today for a great discussion. Also, thank you to Mathematica and Guardian of Honors, colleagues for their technical supporting coordination. This webinar and support materials will be posted on the americorps.gov website under Impact Webinars within the coming weeks. Please feel free to share with your colleagues and networks. We will also be sending out a post webinar survey, so please let us know your thoughts on this webinar and any ideas for future webinars. Thank you all and have a wonderful rest of your day.