

Service as a Pathway to Economic Opportunity: A Roadmap for Governors

Governors across the country are navigating rapidly evolving labor force trends—worker shortages in nearly every sector of the economy, skills gaps created by new technologies, and increased cost of higher education. While labor shortages can provide opportunities for individuals to enter the workforce or transition to new careers, those who face barriers to workforce participation may not benefit if their skills do not align with employers’ needs. A lack of skilled workers can also present obstacles to progress on Governors’ wide-ranging policy priorities, such as completing infrastructure projects, bolstering the teacher talent pipeline, and expanding the capacity of public health systems. As Governors explore all the tools at their disposal to address these challenges, state and national service programs offer a promising strategy for states to address workforce shortages and barriers to workforce participation while addressing Governors’ policy priorities through “service-to-career pathways.”

Through national service, individuals commit their time and labor to activities that address pressing challenges impacting their communities, such as housing insecurity, public health, and disaster relief. National service offers participants the ability to earn a living allowance as well as gain experiences and skills that can advance their personal growth, career development, and civic engagement and qualify for an education award at the completion of their service term. The federal AmeriCorps agency is the largest funder of national service in the country, with the majority of these federal funds passing through state service commissions¹ that oversee state and local funding decisions.

Intentionally designed service-to-career pathways embed career development opportunities into a term of service, building in career exploration, coaching, work-based learning, skills training, and credential attainment as part of the service experience. Service-to-career pathways can create diverse talent pipelines into public and private sectors with worker shortages; increase the capacity of nonprofit and public agencies that host state and national service members; address pressing community and state challenges; and create impact on the members themselves.

¹ According to America’s Service Commissions, state service commissions are “Governor-appointed public agencies or nonprofit organizations... [that] operate at the state and local level granting more than \$400 million from federal national service funds while matching these federal dollars with over \$30 million from state and local sources to support citizen service and volunteerism in America. These funds support more than 40,000 AmeriCorps members.”

State and federal service programs have a decades-long history of engaging diverse groups of state and national service members in work that benefits their communities while providing resources and incentives that help participants transition into educational and professional pathways. Governors and state workforce development policymakers can build on these programs by establishing and expanding service-to-career models that will benefit more individuals, communities, and employers. Policy that supports on- and off-ramps between service programs, training and education programs, and employment can open new opportunities to upskill and reskill the workforce to adapt to the changing economy and increase access to family-sustaining careers.

This roadmap highlights actionable strategies for Governors and state policymakers to meet critical state needs while expanding access to economic opportunity by leveraging service programs as career development opportunities, especially for youth from underserved communities. The roadmap lays out five key elements with related policy options for Governors to consider as they develop and execute a vision for service-to-career pathways in their states:

- 📌 **Survey the landscape and set a statewide vision**
- 📌 **Champion service-to-career pathways**
- 📌 **Align service, workforce development, and other state partners**
- 📌 **Develop a governance and funding strategy**
- 📌 **Engage public, private, and philanthropic stakeholders**

This menu of policy options is intended to provide adaptable solutions that meet states' unique conditions and needs. Underlying these policy options is an emphasis on interagency coordination and public-private partnership to provide a seamless, flexible transition between service and careers. The roadmap also features case studies on innovative state models and emerging best practices for aligning state and national service programs with career pathways. These examples illustrate the opportunities and successes that are possible when public, private, and philanthropic partners are aligned with the Governor's vision for service-to-career pathways.

Survey the Landscape and Set a Statewide Vision

By setting a clear vision for the role of service-to-career pathways in helping to meet critical state needs, Governors can drive coordination among partners in meeting their highest policy priorities. This vision can create a solid foundation to engage stakeholders, grow partnerships, and guide strategy.

- **Survey the landscape:** Defining the scope of service and workforce development is an important first step in developing a statewide vision for service-to-career pathways. Collaborating with state partners – including the state workforce development agency, the state workforce development board, and the state service commission – to understand the landscape of service and workforce development programs and partners can help to assess the state’s assets and capacity for service-to-career models. This process can also help to define the state’s unique challenges that service-to-career models can help to address: state and community needs, workforce shortages, and equitable career pathways, especially for young people from diverse backgrounds.
- **Set key priorities:** Governors’ priorities span a wide range of policy areas, including workforce development, economic development, public health, infrastructure, energy, education, public safety, and much more. A lack of available, skilled workers can pose a major barrier to progress on almost all of the Governor’s highest priorities. Identifying areas where expanding the talent pool is necessary to implement the Governor’s policy agenda can surface opportunities for service-to-career models to play a role in addressing critical state needs.
- **Develop a vision and goals:** Based on the analysis of the landscape and opportunities for service-to-career pathways in meeting the Governor’s top priorities, Governors can develop a vision for service-to-career pathways that meets the unique needs of their state and its residents and provides a north star to align partners across the public and private sector. The vision can be supported by measurable goals related to participation in service programs (including demographic disaggregation of participants), service programs tied to priority industries in the state, skills gained or credentials earned by participants in service-to-career pathways, successful transitions from service programs into education and training programs or employment, and more.

North Carolina Climate Action Corps

In September 2023, Governor Roy Cooper announced the creation of the [North Carolina Climate Action Corps](#), an opportunity for AmeriCorps members to explore career pathways in the energy industry while supporting communities most affected by climate change. Governor Cooper has made transitioning to clean energy a top priority for his administration, issuing an [executive order](#) in January 2022 that sets out clear goals to reduce the state's carbon emissions while increasing equitable, quality employment opportunities in the clean energy economy. The order directs the state partners to identify strategies to increase workforce diversity in clean energy occupations, including strategies such as work-based learning opportunities targeted to underrepresented communities. Leveraging VolunteerNC (the state service commission) and its partners to create the Climate Action Corps creates an additional capacity to meet Governor Cooper's clean energy goals while expanding the talent pool in a priority sector of the state's economy.

Champion Service-to-Career Pathways

Governors are uniquely positioned to drive increased participation in state and national service programs by communicating their value as opportunities for career development and economic mobility. By developing and communicating a value proposition for both participants and employers, Governors can carry out their vision for service-to-careers and demonstrate their commitment to service-to-career pathways as a career development strategy.

- **Develop a value proposition:** Governors, state workforce development policymakers and state service commissions can collaborate to develop effective messaging that clearly communicates the value of state and national service programs as career development opportunities for key audiences, including young people from diverse and underserved communities, workers seeking reskilling or upskilling opportunities, and employers. For young people and workers, this message may relate to the range of career opportunities and increased wages that are possible by enrolling in service-to-career programs, as well as the positive impact their service can have on their communities. For employers, messaging can include the value of state and national service programs in supporting a sustainable talent pipeline that fills critical job openings and diversifies their workforce.
- **Communicate the value of service-to-careers pathways:** Governors have the power to leverage their wide-ranging communications tools to raise awareness of service programs as career development opportunities as well as the value of these models for public and private employers. Opportunities for Governors to highlight their service-to-careers vision may include executive orders, proclamations, events, and strategic communications such as press releases or social media posts.

Maryland SERVE Act

In April 2023, Maryland Governor Wes Moore signed into law the [SERVE Act](#), enacting his signature Service Year Option initiative for recent high school graduates and GED recipients. This state-sponsored opportunity allows participants to spend nine months supporting an organization with a focus on community building while they receive skills and professional experience to help them successfully transition into employment, an apprenticeship, or a postsecondary degree program upon completion of the service program. The legislation also provides funding for Maryland Corps, a similar service-to-careers program open to adults of all ages. Both the Service Year Option program and Maryland Corps engage a range of “host partners,” nonprofits, government agencies, and businesses that provide job training, mentorship, and other resources to participants. Participants in both programs also earn \$15 per hour as well as \$6,000 in tuition assistance. Governor Moore established the cabinet-level [Maryland Department of Service and Civic Innovation](#) via executive order to promote service and volunteerism in the state, including implementation of the Service Year Option program and Maryland Corps.

Align Service, Workforce Development and Other State Partners

Leveraging state and national service programs as career development opportunities requires coordination of state partners in service and workforce development systems. Strategic and operational alignment between these partners and systems can increase efficiency and capacity to implement the Governor’s service-to-careers vision and expand the reach of these programs to serve more participants, especially those from diverse and underserved communities.

- **Convene state partners:** Assembling the relevant state partners to develop and implement successful service-to-career models can help to ensure collective understanding of and action to achieve the Governor’s vision for service-to-career pathways. Partners may include the state service commission, the state workforce agency, the state workforce development board, and the state education agency. Additional state agencies that may be brought to the table include the state economic development agency; agencies with sector-specific workforce development insights such as the state health department or state energy department; and other state agencies interacting with residents from underserved communities such as the state human services agencies and the state vocational rehabilitation agency.
- **Align existing service and workforce development efforts:** Identifying and leveraging existing efforts on workforce development and service can ensure optimal alignment of partners to achieve the Governor’s vision for service-to-career pathways. Many states have existing boards, commissions,



taskforces, or workgroups that serve as forums for convening partners, leading strategic planning, and coordinating implementation. Workforce development and service partners are also likely aligning their work with a variety of existing state and federal plans related to workforce development, state and national service programs, education, economic development, public health, energy, infrastructure, and more. These plans may have existing goals that can be achieved by incorporating a service-to-careers model.

- **Set common goals and identify target populations:** State service commissions and state workforce systems often have overlapping goals for the number and type of populations that are served through their programs. Identifying common goals can surface areas for collaboration between service and workforce development partners. For example, the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires the prioritization of services for “individuals with barriers to employment”² and the federal Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) requires specific career-technical education supports for “special populations.”³ Additionally, a key objective of the [AmeriCorps federal agency’s 2022-2026 Strategic Plan](#) is to “recruit a diverse corps of members and volunteers who reflect those [AmeriCorps is] serving” as well as to “strengthen pathways to education, employment, and other opportunities” for AmeriCorps members.
- **Explore on- and off-ramps between service programs and career pathways:** Providing smooth transitions between state and national service programs and career pathways is critical to improving participant outcomes. Partners can consider points during a service term where coursework, work-based learning opportunities, skills-specific training, or other career development opportunities can be added that will set participants up for success as they transition from service to employment, including opportunities to earn industry-recognized credentials. Likewise, partners can also consider opportunities for workforce development system clients in need of upskilling or reskilling to enroll in service programs that provide training and work-based learning.

² WIOA Sec. 3(24) defines “individual with a barrier to employment” as a member of one or more of the following populations: displaced homemakers; low-income individuals; Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians; individuals with disabilities, including youth who are individuals with disabilities; older individuals; ex-offenders; homeless individuals; youth who are in or have aged out of the foster care system; individuals who are English language learners, individuals who have low levels of literacy, and individuals facing substantial cultural barriers; eligible migrant and seasonal farmworkers; individuals within 2 years of exhausting lifetime eligibility under part a of Title IV of the Social Security Act; single parents (including single pregnant women); long-term unemployed individuals; such other groups as the Governor involved determines to have barriers to employment.

³ Perkins V Sec. 3(48) defines “special populations” as individuals with disabilities; individuals from economically disadvantaged families, including low-income youth and adults; individuals preparing for non-traditional fields; single parents, including single pregnant women; out-of-workforce individuals; English learners; homeless individuals; youth who are in, or have aged out of, the foster care system; and youth with a parent who is a member of the armed forces and is on active duty.

- **Collect data and track performance:** Building an evidence base for the efficacy of service-to-careers programs can be an effective tool to communicate their value to prospective participants and new employer partners, as well as support continuous improvement. To track effectiveness in serving participants and employers, states can adopt metrics related to their Governor’s service-to-career goals and consider what new or existing data can be used to evaluate progress.

Colorado Public Health Works Apprenticeship Model

To support a growing demand for workers in Colorado’s healthcare sector in alignment with Governor Jared Polis’ 2022 [executive order](#) on the expansion on apprenticeship, Serve Colorado (the state service commission) and the Trailhead Institute (a public health nonprofit organization) have partnered with the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE) to establish the [Colorado Public Health Works](#) Registered Apprenticeship program. The one-year program provides participants with paid on-the-job training and classroom instruction to prepare them for careers as public- or private-sector community health workers. Apprentices serve at local public health agencies while they complete the competencies and hours required to earn their U.S. Department of Labor Registered Apprenticeship certificate. The Trailhead Institute serves as the apprenticeship sponsor as well as an AmeriCorps grantee, allowing it to act as an administrator of funds and technical assistance provider to the local public health agencies who host apprentices. CDLE’s Office of the Future of Work (which houses the State Apprenticeship Agency) and Serve Colorado provided technical assistance to the Trailhead Institute in developing the [apprenticeship standards](#) in alignment with AmeriCorps and DOL-registered apprenticeship requirements. In 2023, Governor Polis issued an [executive order](#) that directs Serve Colorado to partner with community-based organizations and postsecondary education institutions to develop three new AmeriCorps work-based learning programs or Registered Apprenticeship programs.

Develop a Governance and Funding Strategy

To avoid duplication of efforts and ensure sustainable resources to support service-to-career models, Governors may consider calling on state service and workforce development partners to develop a governance and funding strategy. This alignment can help to operationalize partnerships and support the development of flexible programs.

- **Designate a point partner:** Governors may consider designating a point agency (or group of partners) who are tasked with coordinating the implementation of the Governor’s service-to-career vision. This point agency can also track progress toward identified goals and take responsibility for continuous improvement of partnerships and programs.
- **Engage state and national service partners in workforce development system governance:** The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) gives Governors significant authority over the federally funded workforce development system. Governors can support service-to-career partnerships

by ensuring that state service commission leaders are represented on the State Workforce Development Board and named as official WIOA partners.

- **Explore opportunities to braid and blend funding:** Service systems and state workforce development systems oversee complex funding landscapes, navigating multiple funding streams with unique (and sometimes conflicting) requirements. State and national service and workforce development partners can explore opportunities to braid and blend funding to develop innovative, flexible programs that can serve a wider range of participants. Relevant funding streams may include: AmeriCorps grants; Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) allocations; Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) allocations; other U.S. Department of Labor programs such as apprenticeship grants, YouthBuild, Job Corps, and the Senior Community Service Employment Program; and state general fund allocations to state-based service and workforce development programs.
- **Provide sustainable state funding to service-to-career pathways:** Governors may consider including dedicated state funding for service-to-career pathways in their budget proposals to help sustain or expand these programs to support their highest policy priorities. For example, Washington Governor Jay Inslee's 2023-2025 budget proposal included several lines of funding to support service-to-career pathways, including a Climate Service Corps and a law enforcement career pathway.
- **Leverage recent federal investments to create and scale programs:** The federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) have made significant investments in state economies that will create good-paying jobs in key sectors, requiring workforce development activities to take advantage of the programs and funding made available by these bills. While these bills lack a dedicated mandate or funding for the workforce development system, there are opportunities for workforce development partners to play a [proactive role](#) in preparing the talent pipelines required to take advantage of these investments. Service and workforce development partners may consider leveraging new and existing service-to-career pathways in sectors such as clean energy and transportation to support their state's efforts to implement these federal programs.

Iowa Refugee & Immigrant Voices in Action (RIVA) AmeriCorps

Under the leadership of Governor Kim Reynolds, Iowa has invested state funds in several innovative service programs that provide career development opportunities to historically underserved populations, including the [Iowa Refugee & Immigrant Voices in Action \(RIVA\) AmeriCorps program](#). The RIVA AmeriCorps program was launched to “increase economic self-sufficiency, job readiness, and community engagement” of refugees living in Iowa. The unique model pairs one AmeriCorps member from the “receiving community” with two AmeriCorps member from the refugee community to train leaders in the refugee community to become work-readiness trainers. These work-readiness trainers then connect fellow refugees with services that help to reduce barriers to employment and then support them in obtaining training and employment that lead to economic self-sufficiency.

Engage Public, Private and Philanthropic Stakeholders

Developing service-to-careers pathways that are responsive to employer needs can help to provide a smooth transition between service programs and employment. Engaging employers as well as other private and public stakeholders can also ensure that service-to-career models offer holistic support to participants and connections to established employment opportunities as they prepare for these transitions.

- **Identify employer priorities:** Employers in public and private sectors are critical partners in developing service-to-career pathways. Service and workforce development partners can consult existing quantitative and qualitative data to identify occupations that comprise quality career paths and work with employer partners in their states to identify the skills they are prioritizing to tailor service-to-career models to in-demand industries and occupations. Employers can also provide reflections on past successes and challenges they have experienced in integrating service members into their workplaces to help inform the design of off-ramps into employment as part of service-to-career pathways. Establishing regular feedback loops with employers can also serve to gauge their evolving needs and skill demands as well as sustain trusted partnerships for long-term growth.
- **Leverage employers as champions:** Employers who have successfully hosted service members for work-based learning opportunities and hired members transitioning out of service programs can be powerful messengers of the value of service-to-careers models. States can explore opportunities to leverage these employer champions to grow networks of public and nonprofit sector employers who are committed to training service members and public, nonprofit, and private sector employers who are committed to hiring service members.
- **Solicit philanthropies and funders as supporters:** Philanthropies can play a key role in the development of service-to-career models, providing funding to launch individual service-to-career pathways, test new models for



member recruitment, invest in wraparound services to address basic needs or financial emergencies, and more. Philanthropic investments can act as seed capital to launch service-to-career pathways, and when their funding is braided with federal and state investments, the impact of their private dollars is amplified, especially for local philanthropies and funders who are dedicated to systems change in their communities.

- **Consider additional stakeholders:** State partners may consider engaging additional stakeholders who can amplify outreach and support to both participants and employers. These stakeholders could include community-based organizations or other state agencies who are providing services to groups that could benefit from access to service as a career pathway. Partnerships with secondary and post-secondary educational institutions can provide additional on- and off- ramps between service and careers. Engaging with business groups such as industry associations or chambers of commerce can provide access to a wider range of employer partners.

The Path Forward

Governors are navigating historic workforce shortages as well as unprecedented opportunities to improve quality of life for their states' residents through new investments in economic development, public health, infrastructure, energy, and more. As state workforce development systems adapt to the changing economic landscape and the future of work, strategic partnerships with state service commissions can expand the range of available training and employment opportunities to meet the needs and preferences of students and workers. Likewise, as state service commissions work to expand and diversify their members, coordinating with state workforce development partners can provide a meaningful path forward from members' service to family-sustaining jobs. This roadmap offers a starting point for Governors and state policymakers to plan strategically to leverage service programs as career development opportunities that set their residents up for success in high-quality careers, ultimately unlocking greater economic opportunity.

Additional Resources

- Schultz Family Foundation: [Increasing Access and Opportunity through State-led National Service Programs: Insights and Recommendations from the National Service Challenge](#) (July 2023)
- America's Service Commissions: [The Value of State Service Commissions: Evaluation Report](#) (January 2021)
- Jobs for the Future, Next100, and Service Year Alliance: [Advancing Pre-Apprenticeship Programming Through National Service](#) (September 2023)
- Next100: [How State Service Commissions Can Advance Equity in AmeriCorps](#) (March 2023)
- Next 100: [How Embracing Workforce Development Can Set Up AmeriCorps Members for Post-Service Success](#) (August 2022)
- Brookings Institution: [Service and conservation programs can lead to infrastructure careers](#) (July 2022)
- Service Year Alliance: [Expanding Service Years in States and Local Communities](#) (June 2021)

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