

CECE WHITEPAPER No. 4

Understanding Community Response to Disaster: Results from Three AmeriCorps Programs

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February 9th, 2026



Executive Summary

AmeriCorps members and volunteers engage in community response to disaster across the United States. How do they explain the skills they use, the motivations that urge them to respond, and their experiences with disaster? Across the three programs that we visited, participants reported drawing from their prior life experiences, whether personal or professional, to increase their communities' resilience in preparation for the onset of disaster. AmeriCorps funding has also allowed participants to gain new skills they apply to their service. Although the specifics in skills, motivations, and experiences varied by stage of life and location, respondents reported a similar commitment to their communities' wellbeing. This whitepaper presents an analysis of data collected from focus groups at three sites during the summer of 2025: in California, Louisiana, and Utah. Older members of the Retired Seniors Volunteers Program in Louisiana and Utah were more motivated to participate by abstract values such as "obligation" and "self-sufficiency," while younger members of the Los Angeles Conservation Corps were motivated by both a desire to serve their community and to develop professionally. Personal experience with disasters also shaped the way that respondents approach disaster in their service work. Their commitment to their communities' wellbeing motivated participants' disaster response despite uncertainty in the future driven by social, economic, and political change.



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This research was conducted as part of the project “Workforce Development & the 4Rs,” which is coordinated out of the [Center for Environment, Community, & Equity](#) at American University.

Note on Methods

During the summer of 2025, our research team visited three programs that have received funding from AmeriCorps. Two were through the AmeriCorps Seniors Retired Senior Volunteers Program (RSVP)—in Utah and Louisiana—and one had been funded through the AmeriCorps State and National funding to California.¹ All three programs support communities as they respond to and recover from disaster while building community resilience. As part of our site visits, the team conducted focus groups with members of each program. Each focus group followed a semi-structured protocol and was facilitated by one to two researchers. The rest of the research team observed and took detailed notes. Focus group recordings were transcribed by one researcher and checked by another researcher. In two of the three programs, site visits also included observation of relevant work. The research team visited the St. Joseph the Worker Church site in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, and the River Rangers and the Trail Maintenance work in Los Angeles, California. Notes and transcripts were analyzed using descriptive coding. In the sections that follow, we present the results of our qualitative analysis of the data collected during these focus groups, supplemented by survey data with the same participants. Quotes have been lightly edited for clarity. .

General Background on Focus Groups and Site Visits

The following table provides summaries of the focus groups that took place during each site visit. In two of the locations, the team also participated in field visits: with St. Joseph the Worker Church in Jefferson Parish, LA and with the LA River Rangers Clean-up and an LACC Trail Maintenance Crew in Los Angeles, CA. Additional information on each of these experiences can be found at the [associated blog posts](#) (written by DataCorps fellows) linked below.

Which skills do participants draw on and build during their service?

Participants in our focus groups referenced drawing on a range of skills in their service. There were clear patterns regarding which skills were utilized that were associated with the respondent’s specific stage of life. In this section, we summarize these patterns.

Those respondents who were part of the Retired Senior Volunteers Program (RSVP) discussed how their service built on skills developed from their prior experiences, such as ham radio operation, law enforcement, and medical aid skills gained from experiences in nursing, military service, and when serving as an Emergency Management Technician (EMT). Many also drew on coordination skills that they had developed from jobs in education and government administration. Volunteers also mentioned skills attained from hobbies, like crocheting and playing guitar.

During the focus groups, RSVP participants in each location also referenced specific training they received as part of their service. In Utah, participants reported receiving training in emergency preparedness to form a Certified Emergency Response Team (CERT); in Louisiana,



participants from multiple volunteer groups spoke about the hurricane emergency response plans that they had produced and the training they had received as part of their development, as well as training around health and energy reduction more broadly. Survey responses showed similar results (Figure 1), with more trade skills training provided in the RSVP in Louisiana and more professional skills training provided in the RSVP in Utah.

RSVP members reported a diverse range of motivations that drove their participation. For some, it is a way of taking care of their mental health as they age, with participants sharing, “I found that it’s good for my wellbeing, my mental health.” “I started because I wanted to interact with others around my age.” One Jefferson Parish participant specifically noted how it helped with their mental health struggles, “I do this for my mental health... because I was headed in depression and anxiety real bad.” A similar sentiment was echoed in Utah, “mental health benefits too, you know, socialize or try to make an improvement or make a difference in your community that makes an impact on both you and the person you’re helping.”

For other members, their participation in volunteering and service was a way of life. They shared: “I’m a person that love[s] to work. I’m always busy. I’m always doing something... I’ve been like that all my life... It’s important that I help”; “I’ve had a lot of volunteer opportunities, I’ve always had a love for volunteerism and I started at a young age.” In the words of a participant from Utah who had volunteered “most of [their] life, one way or another, church groups and that kind of thing.”

Yet, service culture was quite different in each RSVP program. In Utah, the motivation to volunteer and serve by using their skills to prepare their communities revolved around the notion of self-sufficiency. One participant shared, “I like giving back to the community, but also gaining the information helps me to make sure I’m prepared, even if nobody else is.” That self-sufficiency was extended to what’s expected of others. As one participant noted: “even if they don’t volunteer externally [if they are prepared], they just keep it within their household, in their family—that’s less of a burden on services.”

Meanwhile, in Louisiana, participants shared that they had a responsibility to their community. No matter if they can help as materially as they would like, respondents reported feeling a need to show up “even if they come in and you don’t have anything, at least you talk to them. Because sometimes, just talking to people, that helps a whole lot.” Many members reported having received help and now it was time to pay it forward. As one participant mentioned, “I love giving back because, during my life ... so many people helped me to be successful in what I am today. I felt the need of giving back to the community.” In both programs, participants shared that they would have volunteered more if they could have, and that they’d continue doing it until they no longer can.

In contrast to the senior adults who volunteered through the RSVP program, the youth participants who served with the Los Angeles Conservation Corps (LACC) had a much different perspective. Rather than utilizing existing skills when they joined, participants at the LACC reported joining the program to gain skills and certifications that would help them qualify for better pay or more permanent jobs. These certifications can include earning a driver’s license, forklift operation certification, and heavy machinery operations skills that would position them for better paying jobs in stable industries like construction. These skills are also represented in



the type of “other training” that members reported gaining in the survey they completed about their service (Figure 1).

At the same time, the youth participants shared that they were working towards other types of jobs where the certifications they were gaining at LACC were not necessarily relevant. These jobs were diverse and included wildland firefighting, tattooing, data science, photography, visual art, teaching, and research positions. Despite there not being specific certificates for these skills, LACC was responsive to the interests of the youth, with one site visit supervisor sharing that they were able to get training from local ecologists to support the interest of participants who were looking to work in the natural sciences. Many of the youth participants reported expecting to move on to other jobs at LACC once their service ends. Additionally, participants shared that they considered their service with the LACC to be good “starter” jobs that would help their families, while supporting their education and other passions.

Like the RSVP participants, youth participants talked about what keeps them going and brings meaning to their service. Unlike the Utah RSVP participants who found meaning in acting on their ideals of self-sufficiency, and the Louisiana RSVP participants who found meaning in giving back to their community, the youth participants from the LACC reported finding the most meaning from the relational moments they experienced with the surrounding community. A participant in the LACC focus group shared that a “homeless guy came up to [him]” and started “handing out free bread” when the participant was watering trees. Another participant recalled, “one time I was weed whacking in front of a house... the guy saw me and he said can you weed whack this part? [He motioned to] this little tiny piece of grass in front of his house... I was like yeah, I got you for free. And he was like yeah, I got you with two tacos and he gave me four tacos afterwards.” While there is a transactional nature to these anecdotes—the youth participants receive food presumably in exchange for their environmental service—the stories represent concrete examples of mutual care between the corpsmember and community members, rather than abstract ideals of self-sufficiency and obligation.



Figure 1 Focus group participants who also filled out surveys reported receiving a variety of training provided from the three different programs. The green indicates the proportion of responses that are affirmative for that type of training and the blue represents the proportion of responses that were negative for that type of training. Respondents who turned in a survey but did not respond to this series of questions are represented as grey.



What are the participants' experiences with disasters?

Personal experience with disaster, whether imminent, looming nearby, or in the recent past, shaped and increased participants' sense of responsibility toward their communities, despite the increasing difficulties participants face. This section describes how this pattern differed at each study site.

People serving at each site felt varying levels of risk due to the disasters they had personally experienced. Participants in Utah and in Los Angeles, for example, reported experiencing the looming threat of disaster when they smelled smoke after wildfires had hit the area. Participants in Utah expressed the feeling of imminent disaster and the need for their communities to be aware and ready. For those participants, that meant "making sure that people are aware of [potential dangers] and that [they're] prepared for [them]. A lot of that is just individual preparation. That and step outside every once in a while, just smell the air and see if you can smell smoke." For participants in Utah, their careers prior to service allowed them to teach others skills they had gained during their experience in disaster work. Participants that had worked as first responders reported teaching sections of CERT, and those who had received ham radio training through military service were able to assist with emergency communications.

One LACC participant noted that they personally "saw that the fires were initially starting, seeing the smoke plume start out. And going from that to the next day, where everything's just smokey, like, hard to breathe, it was just rough," a sentiment that garnered agreement from other participants. Another participant reported that they had been doing trail work "hearing the fires the whole time." Despite the constant reminder of the wildfires, participants still reported that being outside doing trail work had a positive impact on encouraging them in their work. For the LACC, the relationship with disaster service is direct and demonstrates the value of the work they perform in disasters. During the recent wildfires, corpsmembers "went to two different fires. [They] assisted with the Eaton fire... and the Palisades" working "side-by-side with the California Conservation Corps]" which inspired some LACC members to want to work as wildland firefighters. Some worked on trails "in residential areas... pretty much backyards." Overall, respondents reported that this work gave them a sense that they were directly helping other people deal with the consequences of the fires.

In Louisiana, personal experience with disasters, particularly hurricanes, was widespread (Figure 2) and shaped the understanding of the role of the individuals serving their community. One RSVP volunteer in Louisiana shared that "before [Katrina] some people ain't even known people in their community... after the storm, the community came together... everybody work together in the storm now. So, I think the storm has really brought the community and the families together... we got through this, but we also overcome it." Many RSVP members were involved in disaster response as a part of their careers; their familiarity and first-hand experience encouraged them to get involved after retirement. A participant mentioned working in a nursing home during Hurricane Ida and evacuating the home's residents. Other participants worked in schools where displaced children were relocated. One participant mentioned they "didn't have to volunteer during Katrina or Ida. I was mandatory to work. My job was part of the first responders team." A number of RSVP members reported that they got involved as a way of continuing to do disaster service.



RSVP in Louisiana provides a good example of how participants' personal experience with hurricanes shaped their community-based approach to preparing for future disasters. Staying in coastal Louisiana during a hurricane demonstrated to participants the importance of evacuating. One volunteer remarked, “[we]... check with the neighbors, find out if somebody's gonna stick around. For Ida, that was the bad storm for me... I promise you, I'll never stay home [again]... I tell anybody, you don't want to be in your house.” This statement was met with nods and widespread verbal agreement from the group. Many participants in Louisiana spoke about community preparedness when asked about the risk of future storms.

Although participants found that their experiences with disaster made them more likely to find ways to assist their communities through disaster, all three sites reported increasing difficulties in getting their communities prepared. LACC participants found that preparing for disaster was difficult when it felt like they were barely surviving the current moment. One participant reported wanting to train “to do wildland firefighting but that's a little too crazy,” they feared “it's a little too much of a commitment... I need to like, be prepped for next year, but I don't think I have 'til next year. Especially since [the funding for the training program], I'm not sure if it's going on, this year or next.” Another participant shared, “this year has been kind of tumultuous” dealing with “the whole fire, all that.”

Despite the feeling that disaster service is important, RSVP members report that service is worsening after Katrina. Participants mentioned that “a lot of programs are being cut” and that they found “services during the hurricane season not really what they were” and that “things have gotten worse. The service that's being delivered... nothing has changed for the better. It's changed for the worse.” With the inevitability of future disasters, participants are worried about the loss of crucial services that they, and members in their community, rely on.

Participants in Utah expressed their worries that their communities were not doing enough to prepare, “the disturbing trend that I saw with people, like, thinking I don't have to prepare, the government or neighbors, or worse yet, I'll just go take it from somebody” and mentioned “it's hard to get people involved,” procuring funds for disaster response is difficult “to purchase a little more food or batteries or whatever. It's kind of hard to do that.” If people are not prepared, a participant working in emergency preparedness said that when “disaster hits, [the] line starts to the left; I'm only one person.” The looming threat of disaster encourages Utah participants to be prepared, but reminds them that everyone shares a responsibility to prepare themselves for disaster. Participants in Utah conceded that the government does provide resources in the event of emergency, but they referred to hurricanes in North Carolina and Louisiana as evidence of their unreliability, “Look at the folks there in North Carolina that are still scrambling... so much for the government helping.”

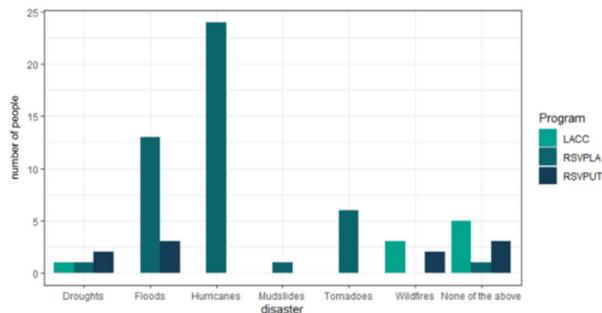
Despite high levels of despondence and anxiety over the future of disaster service, participants shared a strong drive to help others. For participants in the LACC focus group, experience helping with disasters has encouraged them to pursue disaster work. One participant, when asked about a dream job, responded “as a dream dream? I would... want to do wildland firefighting” and a RSVP Utah member working in emergency response said that “just being able to make even that little bit of change... makes a world of difference to [them].” One participant in Louisiana responded to services worsening by remarking that “in the situation that you don't



have no help at all... that's why we need to stick together and... help somebody else... I think it's a good idea for us to be involved in something like [RSVP], especially in hard times." Across all programs, participants' experiences with disasters, as either a volunteer or part of their work, have fostered a desire to help others and to prepare their communities for future disasters.

Survey respondents reported...

Direct Experience with Disaster in Personal Life



Direct Experience with Disaster in Service

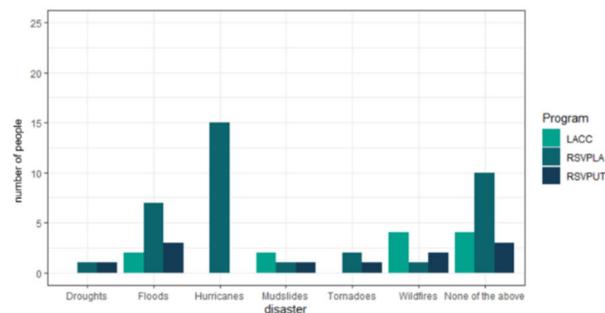


Figure 2 Focus group participants in the three different programs who also filled out surveys reported having a broad range of experiences with disaster in their personal lives and in their service.



Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank AmeriCorps and for their generous support. We also want to thank the teams at the Los Angeles Conservation Corps and the AmeriCorps Seniors Retired Senior Volunteers Program (RSVP)—in Utah and Louisiana for allowing us to study their programs.

Partners & Sponsors





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