

A New Opportunity to Diversify the National Security Workforce Through the American Climate Corps

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Background

In September 2023, the White House launched the American Climate Corps (ACC) initiative, a limited version of the “Civilian Climate Corps” initially proposed in 2021, to “put a new generation of Americans to work conserving our lands and waters, bolstering community resilience, advancing environmental justice, deploying clean energy, implementing energy efficient technologies, and tackling climate change.”¹ Five states already had existing climate corps programs, with five more states launching programs alongside the White House launch. Youth climate organizations such as the Sunrise Movement, have long advocated for a program like this, and young people (namely, Gen Z) are the primary audience for the ACC’s recruitment efforts. Considering the national security implications of climate change and documented challenges of recruitment in the national security workforce, we encourage the interagency leaders of the ACC to learn from these challenges in the program’s implementation to equip a workforce ready and able to protect and advance our national security interests.

For many young people in the workforce, climate change is an existential issue—notably, 40 percent have changed or would change jobs or sectors due to climate concerns.² The same survey reported 60 percent of respondents feeling anxious about the environment and 70 percent actively seeking to minimize their personal environmental impact. “Surging numbers of students” are pursuing university degrees in environmental-related fields.³ Younger generations’ concern about climate change and desire to do something about it, and especially for their employers to do something about it, creates a key opportunity for a program like ACC to thrive.

In terms of national security, since 2008, the U.S. national security community has consistently noted climate disasters as a threat.⁴ The National Intelligence Council found that “climate change will increasingly exacerbate risks to U.S. national security interests as the physical impacts increase and geopolitical tensions mount about how to respond to the challenge.”⁵ Additionally, limited, delayed, or perceived failure of government response to domestic natural disasters reduces public trust and creates inroads for anti-government organizations and conspiracy theories.⁶ Given these significant threats, we believe that efforts such as the ACC to tackle climate change fall into a broad national security spectrum.

The U.S. military is facing a much-discussed recruitment crisis, and the ACC risks suffering similar challenges. ACC leadership would benefit from considering the following as they continue to design and implement the program.

Trust in Government and Bold Climate Action

In 2023, just 14 percent of young people indicated an interest in public service (government and non-profit sector) careers.⁷ This is a slight decrease from current numbers—just over 15 percent of the U.S. workforce “are involved in military, public, and national service at the local, state and federal levels.”⁸ In terms of military recruitment, low recruitment numbers coincide with low levels of confidence in the U.S. military.⁹ Recent Pew polling indicates historically low, and dropping, levels of trust in the U.S. government to do what is right,¹⁰ and a desire from the majority of Americans for the government to take more action on climate change.¹¹

As the government promotes the ACC as a major step toward tackling climate change, it is important that this not be the only step and that the ACC’s work continues to contribute to that goal. The ACC’s goals to recruit

locally and work toward locally-directed priorities will certainly help by emphasizing direct, tangible outcomes. More broadly, youth climate activists have been clear that they expect continued, bold action on climate.¹² If young people feel that the ACC is a substitute for other action, or that its effects are not bold or tangible enough, they will not be inclined to participate in or support the program.

Living Wage

Low unemployment has posed a challenge for military recruitment—as noted in 2012, “As the U.S. economy improves we can expect that the declining civilian unemployment rate and rising civilian real earnings will pose challenges for recruiting and for retention.”¹³ Forest Corps, ACC’s first major interagency partnership, will offer “a compensation package equivalent to \$15 an hour.”¹⁴ According to MIT’s Living Wage Calculator, there is no U.S. state in 2023 in which \$15 is a living wage.¹⁵ In similar programs such as AmeriCorps, low compensation packages have “[made] it difficult for many without external financial support to participate.”¹⁶

A 2021 study by Great Place To Work found that the top two things Gen Z wants from employers are a diverse and inclusive workplace and livable pay.¹⁷ With Gen Z comprising its recruitment pool, the ACC will not be sustainable if its model relies on recruiting young people to work for very low pay. ACC leadership should consider adjusting pay for members according to where they serve, leveraging public-private partnerships to make up the difference in cost.

Career Pathways

A stated goal of the ACC is to “provide pathways to high-quality employment opportunities in the public and private sectors.”¹⁸ As program design and implementation proceeds over the coming months, it is important that this goal not be lost. If young people do not feel that participating in the ACC will help launch their career, they will not pursue the program.

Throughout the ACC’s implementation, leadership should stay in communication with government and private sector partners as well as program alumni to affirm that the program is truly serving as a launch into vital national security areas like cybersecurity. ACC leadership should also welcome partnership and feedback from youth climate activists in this process to maintain momentum and credibility within their communities.

Conclusion

ACC provides an opportunity to reimagine partnerships with the private sector to strengthen the national security workforce through addressing the climate crisis. Young people want to see bold action on climate change, to earn a living wage, and to explore pathways to meaningful careers. It will take collective action through efforts like the ACC to meet these needs.

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official guidance or position of the United States government, nor any other affiliated organization or employer.

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