

# DAY ONE PROJECT

## Establishing Village Corps: A National Early Childhood Education (ECE) Program at AmeriCorps

Shivana Lightman, Ph.D.

April 2022

The logo for the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), consisting of the letters 'FAS' in white, bold, sans-serif font inside a dark teal square.

*The Day One Project Early Career Science Policy Accelerator is a joint initiative between the Federation of American Scientists & the National Science Policy Network.*

## Summary

While becoming a parent can bring great joy, having children can also impose an [economic burden on families](#), [reduce familial productivity in society](#), or cause one or more adults in a family — often mothers — [to step back from their careers](#). In addition, many parents lack access to reliable information and resources related to childhood wellness, nutrition, and development.

As the saying goes, “It takes a village to raise a child.” But what if the metaphorical “village” was our entire nation? The momentum of the American Rescue Plan, as well as the spotlight that the COVID-19 pandemic focused on the demands of caretaking, provides the federal government an opportunity to create a new branch of its existing service corps — AmeriCorps — focused on early childhood education (ECE). This new “Village Corps” branch would train AmeriCorps members in ECE and deploy them to ECE centers across the country, thereby helping fill gaps in childcare availability and quality for working families. The main goals of Village Corps would be to:

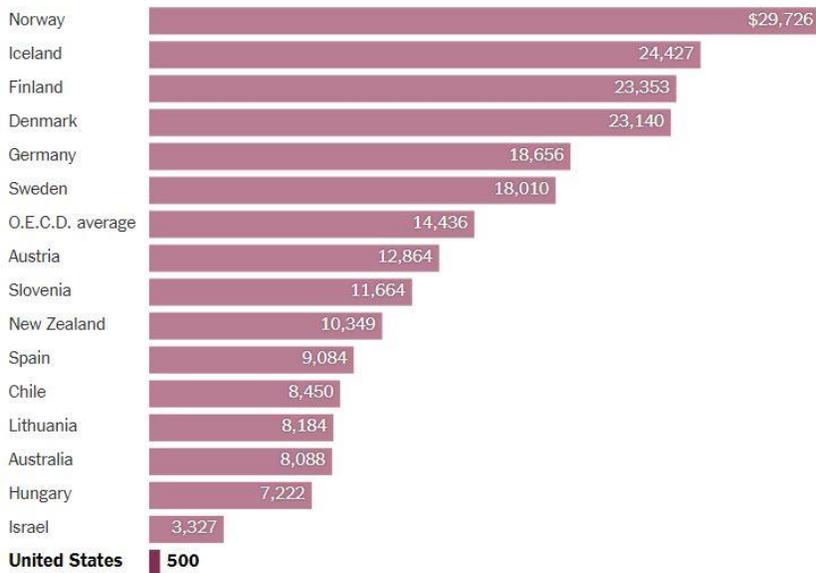
- Alleviate the economic burden on parents by making affordable, consistent, and reliable care and education available for all children ages zero to four.
- Address [the high turnover rate in ECE](#) by leveraging AmeriCorps as a stable pipeline of ECE workers, and by coupling corps placements in ECE centers with a training program designed to grow and retain the overall ECE workforce.
- Boost the American economy by making it easier for parents with young children — particularly mothers — to stay in the workforce.
- Increase childhood health and education outcomes through high-quality early care.

## Challenge and Opportunity

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vast disparity in childcare services available for families in the United States. Our nation spends only [0.3% of GDP](#) on childcare, lagging most other countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Put another way, average public spending on childcare for toddlers in the United States is about \$500, while the OECD average is more than \$14,000 (Figure 1). The problem is compounded by the lack of mandated paid family or medical leave in most states.

## How Much Governments Spend on Child Care for Toddlers

Annual public spending per child on early childhood care.



In the United States, most of the spending is on families living in poverty. Some O.E.C.D. countries are not included because data on their spending was unavailable.

**Figure 1.** Public spending by OECD nations on childcare. Source: [The New York Times](#)

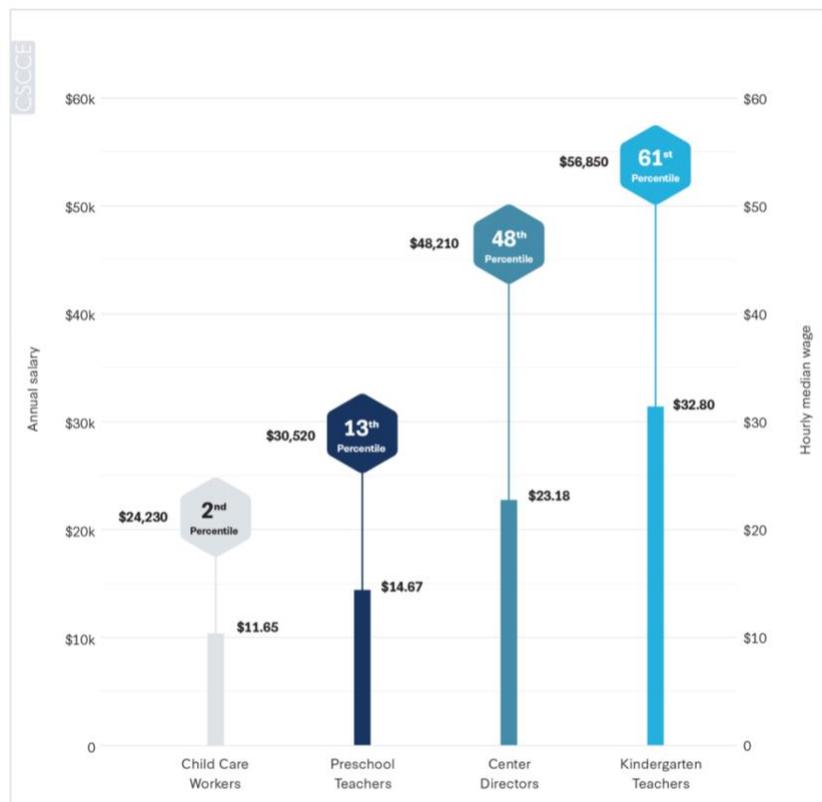
The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCBG)'s Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is the primary source of federal funding for childcare. CCDF support is intended to assist eligible families by providing subsidy vouchers for childcare. However, only [one out of every nine](#) eligible children actually receives this support, and many families who need support do not meet eligibility requirements. Furthermore, according to the National Center for Children in Poverty, the federal Early Head Start program (which includes infants and toddlers before pre-K age) serves only [3% of those eligible](#), leaving a major gap for families of children under the age of three.

Limited federal support for families that need childcare creates a vicious cycle. Unlike public school from kindergarten onwards, ECE and childcare facilities rely mostly on parent fees to stay open and operational. When not enough parents can afford to pay, ECE and childcare facilities will lack sufficient revenue to provide high-quality care. Indeed, the Center for American Progress [found that](#) “the true cost of licensed child care for an infant is 43 percent more than what providers can be reimbursed through the [CCDF] child care subsidy program and 42 percent more than the price programs currently charge families.” This revenue gap has resulted in a worrying hollowing of our nation’s ECE infrastructure. [51% of Americans](#) live in an area that has few or no

licensed<sup>1</sup> childcare options. Only in high-income communities does the predominant model of parent-funded childcare provide enough high-quality ECE to meet the demand.

[Underfunding](#) has left ECE workers barely making a living wage with little to no benefits; although there has been a [heavy public focus](#) on low K–12 teacher salaries, the situation for ECE workers is worse. The average annual salary for childcare workers falls in the lowest second percentile of occupations in the United States, versus the 61<sup>st</sup> percentile for kindergarten teachers (Figure 2). Poor working conditions and compensation create high turnover in ECE, making it even harder for ECE facilities to meet demand.

Moreover, [scholarship and policy initiatives](#) designed to strengthen the training and satisfaction of the ECE workforce tend to focus on lead teachers. Such initiatives largely overlook the needs of assistant teachers/teacher’s aides, even though (i) these support personnel [contribute meaningfully to classroom quality](#), and (ii) [professional development](#) at the aide level has been found to increase [retention](#) (Figure 3) and improve longer-term career outcomes.



**Figure 2.** Selected occupations ranked by annual pay, 2019. Source: [Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, UC Berkeley](#)

<sup>1</sup> Licensure is a [key component of a high-quality ECE center](#).



**Figure 3.** Six key contributions to teacher exodus. [Source: Research Brief: Solving the Teacher Shortage How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators](#)

These challenges merit federal intervention. Even though ECE is largely a private endeavor, high-quality and widely available early childcare and education contributes to the public good. [Research shows](#) that public investment in childcare pays for itself several times over by making it easier for [parents](#) to participate in the labor force. Additionally, spending \$1 on early care and education programs has been shown to [generate \\$8.60 in economic activity](#).

But it is not only the cost of childcare that is inhibitory. In 2016, [two million parents](#) made career sacrifices due to problems encountered with obtaining childcare. Mothers and single parents [are especially likely](#) to be adversely impacted by limited access to childcare. In 2020, mothers of older children remained more likely to participate in the labor force [than mothers with younger children](#). Families are finding it increasingly difficult within the current system to [find and gain access to quality](#)

[childcare](#), leading to employment issues and an attrition of women from the workforce.

Deploying a federally funded corps to fill the ECE personnel gap would stabilize ECE and childcare centers, creating a strong foundation for families and communities that will yield increased economic growth and equity. Americans have never fully benefited from a federally funded and run childcare system. It is time for the federal government and Congress to treat childcare as a public responsibility rather than a personal one.

## Plan of Action

Building on momentum for familial support established by the American Rescue Plan, the federal government should launch Village Corps, a new ECE-focused branch of AmeriCorps. [AmeriCorps](#) is “one of the only federal agencies tasked with elevating service and volunteerism in America.” AmeriCorps also has a long history of implementing programs in classrooms throughout the United States to “support students’ social, emotional, and academic development”, but has never had a program dedicated exclusively to training and placing Corps members in ECE. Village Corps would do just that. Participants in Village Corps would receive federally administered and/or sponsored [training](#) in fundamental aspects of high-quality ECE, including but not limited to CPR and first aid, child-abuse prevention, appropriate child and language development, classroom management, and child psychology. Village Corps members would then be placed in ECE centers across the country, providing an affordable, reliable source of infant and early childhood care for working families in the United States. Village Corps members would also have access to ongoing professional-development opportunities, enabling them to ultimately receive a Child Development Associate® (CDA) or similar tangible credential, and preparing them to pursue longer-term career opportunities in ECE.

Village Corps can be developed and deployed via the following steps:

### **Step 1. Establish Village Corps as a new programmatic branch of AmeriCorps.**

AmeriCorps already comprises [several distinct branches](#), including State and National, VISTA, and RSVP. Village Corps would be a new programmatic branch focused on training corps members in ECE and placing them in ECE centers nationwide. The program could start by placing corps members in Early Head Start and Head Start locations, since these are directly funded by the federal government. Piloting the program for a year at 10 sites, with five corps members per site, would require about \$2 million: \$1.25 million to cover salary costs, plus an additional \$750,000 to subsidize living and healthcare expenses, provide an optional education credit, and account for administrative costs.

Program reach could ultimately be expanded to additional childcare centers. The federal government could even consider creating and operating a new network of ECE centers staffed predominantly or exclusively by corps members. As Village Corps

# DAY ONE PROJECT

develops and grows, it should prioritize placements in states, regions, and cities where a disproportionate share of the population lives in a [childcare desert](#).

## **Step 2. Develop the core components of the Village Corps volunteer experience.**

Recruitment and placement of Village Corps participants should follow the same general mechanisms used for other AmeriCorps divisions; however, the program should strive to place Village Corps participants in positions within their own communities. Village Corps service should be for a minimum of one year, with the option to extend to two. In addition to a modest salary, access to healthcare benefits, and a possible living stipend, Village Corps participants should receive the following benefits:

- **Student loan forgiveness.** There is precedent for AmeriCorps offering participants assistance with student loan debt: AmeriCorps service counts towards [Public Service Loan Forgiveness](#) and may make participants eligible for temporary [loan forbearance](#); the [Segal AmeriCorps Education Award](#) can also be used to repay qualified student loans and/or to pay current educational expenses at eligible institutions. Expanding this precedent — at least temporarily — to provide complete student-loan forgiveness for Village Corps participants would be a compelling way to attract initial cohorts and help get the program off the ground.
- **Non-Competitive Eligibility status** to give Village Corps alumni a step up in the federal hiring process.
- **A pathway to Child Development Associate® (CDA) credentialing.** The [CDA® credentialing program](#) “is a professional development opportunity for early educators working in a variety of settings with children ages birth to 5 years old”. Earning a CDA credential yields multiple [benefits](#) for people interested in pursuing careers in ECE. CDA® credentials can currently be earned through a variety of [pathways](#). AmeriCorps should work with the Council for Professional Recognition on establishing a designated pathway for Village Corps members.
- **Connections to future career opportunities.** Leveraging models like [Grow Your Own Teachers](#), Village Corps should provide participants with structured avenues to translate skills and experienced acquired during their service into long-term career opportunities in their home communities. Additionally, Village Corps and its training could be utilized as a talent pipeline and pathway for upward mobility in Head Start and Early Head Start centers.

## **Step 3. Build a path for program funding and growth.**

To start, the Biden-Harris Administration should work with the House Committee on Education and Labor and the Senate HELP Committee to see if Village Corps can be integrated into legislation like the [Universal Child Care and Early Learning Act](#). The Administration could also consider launching Village Corps as part of the [American Families Plan](#), and/or capitalizing on the budget reconciliation package for [Build Back](#)

[Better](#). This package [is awarding](#) \$9.5 billion in grants to Head Start agencies in states that have not received payments under universal preschool programs and \$2.5 billion annually for FY2022–2027 to improve compensation for Head Start staff. An additional way to make the program even more attractive would be to propose cost-matching of federal funds for Village Corps by states (if program participants are deployed in state-aided childcare centers), and/or through partnerships with key stakeholders and philanthropic organizations (e.g., Child Care Aware of America, the Child Care Network, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and the First Five Year Fund) that have a history of supporting expansion and access to ECE. Given the downstream effects of ECE disparity in the workforce, capitalizing on the Defense Production Act could also be an avenue of support for Village Corps (see FAQ). For the longer term, the federal government could consider complementing Village Corps with a [Federal Childcare and Education Savings Account \(CESA\)](#) that would further subsidize childcare for families nationwide.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted gaping holes in our national early childhood care and education (ECE) fabric and has significantly exacerbated a failing system. The effects of this failure are widespread, compromising familial stability and economic security, the health, and future outcomes of American children, ECE worker retention, national productivity, and workforce participation. Establishing a new ECE-focused branch of AmeriCorps is an innovative solution to a pressing issue: a solution that builds on existing programmatic infrastructure to use talent and funds efficiently and equitably. Village Corps would create a talent pipeline for future ECE educators, boost the American workforce, and make high-quality infant and childcare easily accessible to all working families.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. Why should the federal government establish a new branch of AmeriCorps instead of just expanding childcare subsidies?

Current federal assistance for ECE is provided in the forms of subsidies and grants. This avenue is limited in its impact, reaching only 1 in 9 eligible families. Moreover, licensed childcare in many instances costs [43%](#) more than what providers are eligible to be reimbursed for through federal childcare subsidies, and 42% more than what providers can sustainably charge families. This disparity between subsidized and actual costs has created a system that underpays ECE providers, resulting in lower-quality childcare and scarce availability of childcare slots for subsidy-eligible families. Additionally, because even federally subsidized ECE centers [rely heavily](#) on fees collected by families, they are at higher risk of closure during difficult times (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) than educational facilities (e.g., K–12 schools) that are fully federally funded.

The federal government could try to remedy these issues through a massive infusion of cash into childcare subsidy programs. But a national-service-oriented approach —

i.e., working through AmeriCorps to direct additional human capital to ECE — is a creative and potentially more cost-efficient strategy that is worth trying.

## **2. How will centers be identified/selected for Village Corps placements?**

The first suite of Village Corps participants will be placed at existing Early Head Start Centers, which must adhere to a [strict set of performance standards](#). In later years, Village Corps could partner with state agencies or NGOs and philanthropic organizations that support ECE centers in areas characterized by childcare deserts.

## **3. Will public funding for ECE guarantee higher salaries for ECE workers?**

Not directly, but [it has been shown](#) that teachers and caregivers who work in publicly funded settings earn higher wages than those in non-publicly funded settings. Hence it is reasonable to expect that public funding for ECE will translate into higher salaries for ECE workers.

## **4. How will Village Corps be incorporated into AmeriCorps and be screened/selected?**

AmeriCorps currently has seven sub-programs through which it disseminates volunteers; Village Corps would become the eighth. As a sub-program of AmeriCorps, Village Corps participants would have to undergo the general AmeriCorps application process to be selected to serve. In addition, Village Corps should look for the following traits in its applicants:

- Coachable
- Accountable
- Problem solver and critical thinker
- Takes initiative and possess leadership qualities
- Resilient
- Adaptive
- Excels in a fast paced/challenging environment
- Team player

## **5. What is an alternative support mechanism for Village Corps?**

A lack of quality ECE options has a dramatic effect on workforce participation. The market failure of undersupplied ECE options decreases economic productivity. Village Corps would address some of these market failures by stabilizing the ECE workforce and fulfilling the labor requirements for high-quality ECE centers, thereby enabling

# DAY ONE PROJECT

families to increase workforce participation and economic productivity. Increased workforce participation is especially important for helping the United States remain globally competitive in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. [40% of women and 23% of men in full-time](#) STEM jobs leave or switch to part-time work after their first child. Taken together, these facts make a compelling case for using the Defense Production Act to support Village Corps.

There is precedent for the government utilizing funds in this manner. During World War II, large-scale entry of women into the workforce created sudden and pressing demands for childcare. Congress responded by passing the Defense Housing and Community Facilities and Services Act of 1940, also known as the [Lanham Act](#). The law funded public works — including childcare facilities — in communities that had defense industries. About 3,000 federally subsidized and run Lanham centers ultimately provided childcare for up to six days a week and certain holidays. Parents only paid the equivalent today of \$10/day for care.

## About the Author



**Shivana Lightman** is a proud full-time mother, immunologist, and policy entrepreneur. She received her Ph.D. in Immunology from Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center/University at Buffalo. Her areas of expertise include B cell biology, durable humoral immunity, and long-lived antibody titers. As a graduate student, Shivana co-founded a science-policy impact group as a space for young researchers to explore the worlds of science communication, science policy, and the wider-reaching impacts of their work. She also moonlit as a consultant for a venture-capital fund, conducting due diligence on deep-tech companies. Shivana's role as a mother, combined with her expertise in immunology, has spurred her passion for scientific communication and policy, particularly with respect to the social and economic benefits that scientific progress can deliver. She is committed to addressing the gaps between social and scientific policy with creative and innovative solutions that emphasize effective implementation.

## About the Day One Project



The Federation of American Scientists' Day One Project is dedicated to democratizing the policymaking process by working with new and expert voices across the science and technology community, helping to develop actionable policies that can improve the lives of all Americans. For more about the Day One Project, visit [dayoneproject.org](https://dayoneproject.org).

*The Day One Project offers a platform for ideas that represent a broad range of perspectives across S&T disciplines. The views and opinions expressed in this proposal are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views and opinions of the Day One Project or its S&T Leadership Council.*