



Literacy First

So you want to do *WHAT* next year?

A service FAQ for parents and loved-ones



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What is AmeriCorps? What is a service year exactly?

AmeriCorps is a network of hundreds of programs across the nation, connecting over 70,000 Americans to meet local community needs annually. There are three branches of AmeriCorps: NCCC, VISTA, and AmeriCorps*State. Literacy First is an AmeriCorps*State program, operating at the local level to meet critical early literacy needs in the Austin, Texas community.

AmeriCorps members participate in a **paid service year** that gives them both a monthly living stipend and an education award to use toward paying back federal loans or for future education expenses. Furthermore, a service year gives people the opportunity to develop real-world skills through a transformative experience serving the community in a tangible and impactful way.

Read more about [AmeriCorps](#) and [Service Year Alliance](#).

What are the benefits of a service year?

Serving one or more terms of national service as an AmeriCorps member has a rich variety of benefits. Many people choose to serve as a gap year after college or graduate school, or as a mid-career transition to try a new profession or trade before making a long-term commitment. AmeriCorps alumni are a community of engaged citizens who carry their commitment to strengthen America into their careers. A 2014 longitudinal impact study concluded that AmeriCorps alumni have these top five interpersonal skills that are highly marketable and sought-after in the professional world: initiative, interpersonal and intercultural communication, adaptability, collaboration, and accountability. Read more about this study [here](#).

A year of service teaches the participant soft skills and provides a pathway to a new profession. The skills and experience associated with a service year are recognized and highly-valued by employers; in fact, over 500 private, public and nonprofit sector employers are recognized as Employers of National Service and are dedicated to hiring AmeriCorps alums. Read more and see a list of Employers of National Service [here](#).

What is Literacy First?

Literacy First is an AmeriCorps program that focuses on early childhood literacy intervention. Our mission is to place highly-trained AmeriCorps members in low-income schools to deliver **intensive** and **effective tutoring** to advance K-2 students to grade level in reading by 3rd grade.

What is the relationship between AmeriCorps, Literacy First, and The University of Texas at Austin?

Literacy First is an outreach program housed at the University of Texas at Austin's Charles A. Dana Center. Our program was founded by Dr. Uri Treisman (Dana Center Director) and colleagues in 1994, and was one of the first AmeriCorps programs to be funded in the state of Texas. Since its inception, over 1,500 Literacy First AmeriCorps members have tutored more than 19,000 children, teaching them the fundamental skills they need to be successful in school and life.

How effective is the Literacy First program?

Each year nearly 100 Literacy First tutors work with 2,000 kindergarten, first and second grade students through one-on-one daily, intensive, research-based tutoring intervention. Our program monitors student progress on a weekly basis and uses a data-rigorous methodology to make informed instructional decisions for each child. Our strategy and continued dedication to improvement results in an average of **75% of students enrolled in the Literacy First program reaching grade-level benchmarks in reading or making accelerated and measurable progress toward achieving this goal.** Watch a video about our program efficacy [here](#).

What will my loved-one be doing while serving with Literacy First?

Literacy First AmeriCorps members serve as full-time literacy tutors for 10 months following the school calendar (September through June). Our tutors serve 40 hours a week at a low-income elementary school campus in Austin, Texas, and five hours a week with a non-profit community partnership of their choice. Literacy First partners with over 30 nonprofits to help meet the needs of local families in Austin through a variety of experiences.

Literacy First tutors see 8-10 kindergarten, first, and second grade students daily, working with them one-on-one for 20-30 minutes to provide research-based reading intervention. More specifically, Literacy First tutors work with students on phoneme awareness, basic phonics, decoding fluency, and oral reading fluency in either English or student's native Spanish.

Your loved one will be serving on an elementary school campus full-time and will work with about 20 total students throughout the year. On average, 15 of those students will reach grade-level reading or make measurable progress toward that goal because of the impact your loved-one has on their lives.



What does it mean that Literacy First is a bilingual program?

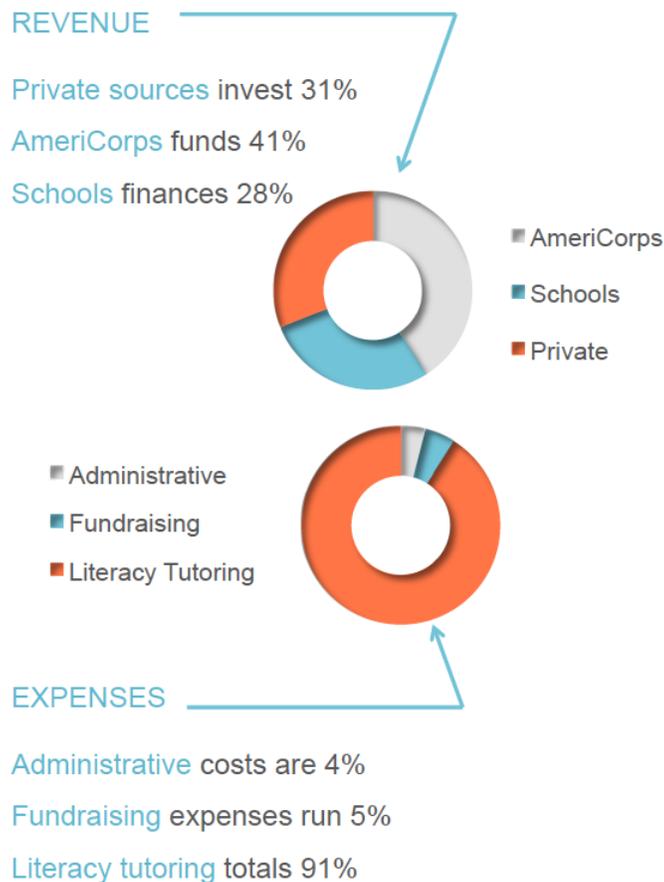
Literacy First is committed to teaching students to read in both English and Spanish. Many Austin-area schools have bilingual education programs for students who speak Spanish as their first language. Roughly half of our AmeriCorps members are bilingual literacy tutors, teaching students to read in their native language. Literacy First is recognized nationally as a Bight Spot for Hispanic Education by the White House and by Austin Independent School District for Latino Excellence in Advocacy. Read more about our dedication to bilingual education [here](#).

Will my loved-one be working alone or with others?

Literacy First tutors serve on a campus in teams of 2-4 members, depending on the size of the school and the needs of the campus. Though each tutor is responsible for their individual caseload of 8-10 students, campus teams will work together on a variety of projects throughout the year. Literacy First is a team-oriented environment; we believe that many hands make light work!

Where does Literacy First's funding come from?

Literacy First is an effective public-private partnership that brings together the resources of AmeriCorps, the University, and the local community to meet a pressing need for improved reading achievement among low-income students. Our current funding comes from federal grants, local foundations, and private donors.



How much support and what type of support will be provided?

Literacy First is dedicated to providing intensive, continued training and support to our AmeriCorps members. Our tutors begin the year as unskilled literacy advocates and end the year as early childhood literacy experts.

All AmeriCorps members participate in Pre-Service Training, where they learn the fundamental skills necessary to be successful in their service term. At Literacy First, the first week of the service term is spent together as an entire cohort, meeting peers and colleagues, getting to know the staff, teambuilding, and learning about the program. Tutors are given training materials and curriculum, and receive expert coaching and plenty of practice time to learn our systems, policies and procedures. We even have a program Lingo Bingo game to help tutors begin to internalize our language and win cool AmeriCorps prizes at the same time!

At the end of Pre-Service Training, your loved-one will learn what school campus they'll be placed at as well as who their teammates and Supervisor will be. Literacy First Supervisors serve as literacy coaches for our tutors, and will visit each campus at least once a week to provide support and ongoing feedback throughout the year.

Many of our tutors move to Austin specifically to serve with Literacy First and may not have a support system here when they arrive. Literacy First is committed to helping your loved-one find friends and establish an 'Austin family'. Upon accepting a position with Literacy First, our recruiter will invite your loved-one to join two Facebook groups; one for incoming Literacy First tutors, and one for all Austin AmeriCorps members (350 across eight programs). Our program also believes in investing in our tutors across service years; we offer additional leadership development for returning members, and as a result, see roughly 30% of our cohort return to serve a second (or third or fourth) term of service. We employ our returning members to serve as ambassadors for their new teammates by posting on the Facebook page and inviting them to social gatherings to cultivate a community of support. Our tutors find lifelong friends through service, ensuring that they will have a successful and meaningful experience.



Why should my loved-one move to Austin?

Service is a fundamental part of Austin's culture. Often known as 'a tale of two cities', Austin is both ranked as the best place to live in America while being one of the most economically segregated metro areas in the U.S. AmeriCorps members in Austin have the unique opportunity to explore a vibrant city while making the world a better place, taking advantage of all that Austin has to offer while helping to close an often-overlooked gap in resource disparity.

Read more about Austin's status [here](#) and [here](#).

Will my loved-one be safe living in Austin?

Austin is a very safe city, with crime rates lower than average for cities of its size (approximately 2 million people). Violent crime is extremely rare in Austin, however, property crime is more common. It's important to talk with your loved one about ways to take precautions against crime, especially if this is their first time living in a bigger city. Austin's AmeriCorps programs have put together an Austin [safety guide](#) to help members make the transition safer and easier.

Where will my loved-one live? Will they need roommates? Will there be help in finding and providing housing?

Literacy First does not provide housing for our AmeriCorps members, however, we provide housing recommendations and resources compiled by current and former tutors. We feel that it's important for members to make housing choices based on their individual needs. Some of our resources include this [housing guide](#), several Facebook groups, and a mentor for members who may have never lived in a city environment before. We encourage members to live together, either with other Literacy First members or members of another AmeriCorps program in town. Generally, AmeriCorps members and alumni make great roommates, have a steady income, and have been thoroughly background-checked.

Austin is both the capital of Texas and a college town, so there is an abundant range of housing options available. We welcome new hires to speak with a current member about their housing search. Our current tutors have a wealth of knowledge about transitioning to the city of Austin!

What if my loved-one needs to leave their service term early?

Literacy First is committed to supporting our members, and we understand that sometimes things happen in life that make service no longer possible. If a member feels they need to leave the program before the end of their member service agreement period, they should reach out to their supervisor so that program staff can work with them on this issue. In some cases, members may be able to earn a pro-rated education award based on the number of hours completed with the program.

Will moving expenses be supplemented?

Due to the number of members serving each year, AmeriCorps*State programs are not able to use federal funding to pay for moving expenses for AmeriCorps members. At this time, Literacy First does not provide any reimbursement for moving expenses.

How much will my loved-one get paid? Will they be able to support themselves financially?

The short answer is, yes, with some budget savviness and know-how, your loved-one can absolutely live on the AmeriCorps stipend in Austin. In fact, more than 350 people do it every year! Literacy First AmeriCorps members earn a gross living stipend of \$1,373 per month, which comes out to about \$1,100 take-home pay. This money is considered income and is distributed on the 7th of each month as a paycheck; there are no restrictions on how AmeriCorps members use their stipend. Most AmeriCorps members are eligible to apply for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. Literacy First will walk members through this process at the beginning of the year, and for those who qualify, they will receive \$180-\$200 per month for food expenses. An example tutor budget is listed below; housing is the biggest expense and can vary drastically depending on where a tutor lives and how many roommates they have. Members are permitted to have another job, provided that it does not conflict with service hours. Literacy First tutors will often babysit, wait tables, or walk dogs to earn a little extra cash, should they need it.

Example AmeriCorps Member Monthly Budget:

<u>INCOME</u>	<u>EXPENSES</u>
Stipend: \$1,100	Rent: \$450-600
SNAP: \$180-200	Utilities: \$60-80
	Internet: \$25
	Cell Phone: \$40
	Car Insurance: \$100

For a personalized example, see how former Literacy First tutor Kathy Humphreys budgeted her money during her service year in this [blog post](#).

Does Literacy First provide healthcare?

Yes! If your loved-one is not covered under another plan (parent, spouse, etc.), Literacy First will provide health insurance and pay the monthly premium. During enrollment, your loved-one will be asked to select health insurance or waive the coverage. If a Literacy First tutor loses coverage at any time during their service term, they can be added to the Literacy First insurance plan. Insurance coverage is provided by Cigna through the Corps Network, and is health insurance only (no dental or vision is provided).

What if my loved-one got sick and couldn't work? Would they get paid?

While AmeriCorps members do not earn sick or vacation days the way that most employees do, our program absolutely recognizes that tutors should not be serving when they are sick and will allow members to stay home to rest and get well. Our current policy states that if a member is absent for three or more consecutive days, they will need a doctor's note to return to work. In more serious cases of illness or injury that require a longer absence, a member may be suspended without pay until they feel they can return to service. In these cases, Literacy First staff will work with the individual member to figure out what's best for their needs and for the program.

Additional Resources

Below is a comprehensive list of the links and supplemental information referenced throughout this guide.

AmeriCorps FAQs

<https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/amicorps/join-amicorps/amicorps-faqs>

Service Year Alliance: What is a Service Year?

http://about.serviceyear.org/what_is_a_service_year

Top 5 Skills AmeriCorps Alums Provide Employers

<https://blog.amicorpsalums.org/2014/12/09/top-5-skills-amicorps-alums-provide-employers/>

Employers of National Service

<https://www.nationalservice.gov/special-initiatives/employers-national-service>

Bright Futures Ahead for Austin (a video summarizing program efficacy)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5LL62Yuksc>

Hidden Gem at UT Not So Hidden Anymore (blog post about bilingual education)

<http://literacy1st.blogspot.com/2016/05/hidden-gem-program-at-ut-not-so-hidden.html?q=bright+spot>

Austin Named Best Place to Live in America by U.S. News and World Report

<http://austin.blog.statesman.com/2017/02/07/austin-named-best-place-to-live-in-america-by-u-s-news-and-world-report/>

Report: Austin most economically segregated major metro area in U.S.

<http://www.mystatesman.com/business/report-austin-most-economically-segregated-major-metro-area/k2IFoUsVKTyoL6UxYbbONO/>

AmeriCorps Stay Safe in Austin Guide

<https://create.piktochart.com/output/23073989-stay-safe-in-austin>

Literacy First Austin Housing Guide

<https://create.piktochart.com/output/19763535-literacy-first-austin-housing-guide>

How to Live in Austin on an AmeriCorps Budget (blog post)

<http://literacy1st.blogspot.com/2015/05/how-to-live-in-austin-on-amicorps.html?q=how+to+live+on+a+stipend>

Do you still have questions?

If you have questions specific to your loved-one that aren't covered in this guide, please give us a call or send us an email – we're happy to talk to you about national service!

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