

# COPPER COUNTRY AMERICORPS



700 Park Avenue, Houghton, Michigan 49931  
906-482-3663 or 800-236-5657  
Fax: 906-482-7329 ~ email: ccac@up.net

Michelle LaCourt, *Program Director*

*Strengthening our community for youth*

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:**  
Michelle LaCourt, 482-3663  
e-mail: ccac@up.net

## **Copper Country AmeriCorps likely will not operate in 2003**

HOUGHTON – The Copper Country AmeriCorps program likely will not operate in 2003-04 due to federal funding cuts.

The Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees the national service program, announced Monday that funding for AmeriCorps programs nationwide in 2003-04 would be cut 85 percent. The cut is due to accounting errors at CNCS, which led to over-enrollment of members and a lack of funding to pay for their educational benefits.

In Michigan, this translates to a reduction from \$6.2 million to \$832,000. There are currently 24 programs in Michigan with 522 members. The cut will reduce the amount of programs to two or three and the amount of members to 65.

Copper Country AmeriCorps Director Michelle LaCourt said the two or three Michigan programs that will be funded have been identified, and about 10 other high-quality programs are on a “pending” list. The programs on the pending list may be funded if additional appropriations are added, which LaCourt said is unlikely.

“Copper Country AmeriCorps is on top of the list, so if any additional money is appropriated, we may be able to operate a program,” LaCourt said. “But as it stands right now, there will not be a local program this coming year.”

Copper Country AmeriCorps began in 1997 and has grown to a current membership of 32. Members commit to a year of service in local schools, daycare centers and other social-service agencies such as Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Members receive a modest living allowance, and after completing

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the year of service they qualify for a \$4,725 award to go to college.

LaCourt said members have focused primarily on education by tutoring and mentoring students, conducting or assisting with after-school programs, and providing remedial homework help. Another key role has been helping agencies to generate, train and manage volunteers for various projects.

Here are some statistics:

- **Tutoring and mentoring.** Over the past two years, members tutored or mentored more than 650 students, of which 387 increased their academic performance at least half a letter grade;
- **Special-needs children.** In 2001-02, members helped 25 special-needs children in the Special Kids in Preschool (SKIP) program, operated jointly by the Copper Country Intermediate School District and B-H-K Child Development Board;
- **After-school activities.** Members operated after-school initiatives that annually involved more than 3,000 students;
- **Volunteer recruitment and management.** Over the program's six years, members have generated more than 10,000 volunteer hours from community members to support a variety of projects.

Doreen Klingbeil, Houghton Elementary School principal, said the loss of the school's AmeriCorps worker will be felt.

"I'm terribly disappointed to hear that news because we have relied on AmeriCorps for the past couple of years now to help our students with tutoring, to help with after-school activities," she said, adding that the member helped out in the library and computer lab. "It directly impacts students here at our school, so it is a loss."

Members also coordinated and operate four communitywide service projects each year. These included:

- **Alcohol Free Weekend.** This year-round campaign sought to provide alternatives to alcohol use for area youth. The campaign included speakers and informational campaigns at schools and culminated each year with "Alcohol Free at the SDC", a night full of fun alternatives to

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drinking that drew more than 1,000 middle and high school students from around the Copper Country;

- **Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service.** Every January, Copper Country AmeriCorps members coordinated and implemented a service project in honor of Martin Luther King Jr., one of America's foremost civil rights leaders. The focus of these projects changed each year, but each project was intended to improve the local community. Past projects included holding an essay and poster contest for youth, visiting the elderly and creating a mural.
- **The Great Cardboard Boat Regatta.** Held in conjunction with Bridgefest, this annual event allowed groups and individuals the chance to build and race a boat made of corrugated cardboard.
- **Make A Difference Day.** Each year on the last Saturday in October, Copper Country AmeriCorps members took part in a Make A Difference Day service project. Make A Difference Day is a national effort sponsored by USA Weekend Magazine to encourage community service while improving the local community. Past efforts included painting an elementary school kitchen, walking animals, enhancing a Halloween party for the elderly, preparing local school nature trails and making improvements to playgrounds.

The program had been recognized several times in its short history. In 2001, Gov. John Engler selected Copper Country AmeriCorps as the Governor's Service Award recipient for Outstanding National Service Program in Michigan. The program also placed three members as finalists in the Governor's Service Award for Outstanding National Service Program Member.

Rod Liimatainen, executive director of B-H-K Child Development, the sponsor and fiscal agent of Copper Country AmeriCorps, said the loss of the program goes far beyond the impact on local students.

"Of course, any loss of services that benefit children is terrible, but this cut also means the elimination of 35 jobs in the Copper Country," Liimatainen said, alluding to

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the 32 members and three administrative staff employed by the program. “In an area with an already weak economy, that is a big loss.”

Liimatainen said AmeriCorps tends to provide meaningful employment to people in a transition phase in their lives, including recent high school and college graduates who want to help their community for a year while deciding on a career path. In that sense, he added, AmeriCorps has filled a niche in the job market while helping to keep young people in the Copper Country.

In addition, the program has helped to fill holes in tight school and social-service agency budgets, he said. With a federal subsidy covering much of a member’s living allowance, schools and agencies were able to pay a relatively low cost – about \$5,000 per member each year – for a flexible, motivated, full-time employee who was trained to work with youth.

Schools and agencies to be affected by the loss of members include: Adams Township Schools; Baraga Area Schools; Chassell Township Schools; Dollar Bay-Tamarack City Area Schools; Hancock Public Schools; Houghton-Portage Township Schools District; Public Schools of Calumet, Laurium and Keweenaw; Copper Country Intermediate School District; Big Brothers Big Sisters; Community Arts Center; Copper Country Mental Health Services Institute; Good Will Farm Board; Keweenaw Community Foundation’s Youth Advisory Committee; Keweenaw Family Resource Center; Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly; and B-H-K Child Development Board.

For more information, contact LaCourt at 482-3663.