



JESUIT VOLUNTEER CORPS

Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

February 21, 2019 | Washington, DC

Universal Service Hearing: Inspiring Universal Service Across America

The Value of Faith-based Service

Tom Chabolla, President

Jesuit Volunteer Corps

First, I would like to extend my deep gratitude to Chairman Heck, Vice Chairs Gearan and Wada, and to the other members of the Commission. I am pleased for this opportunity to describe the value of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps for our young leaders and the communities they serve.

The Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC) was founded on the belief that cultivating a culture of service among young people is a valuable contribution to the common good. In addition, it provides a unique opportunity to broaden their understanding of the challenges many face in our society. We do this by engaging young adults (Jesuit Volunteers) in service to others – living with, learning from, and serving our neighbors in need. For over 40 years, JVC has been a pioneer in the service landscape providing opportunities for youth between the ages of 21 - 35 to contribute to the betterment of society. Our former Jesuit Volunteer network is more than 10,000 strong throughout the world.

The Jesuit Volunteer Corps recruits young leaders to build a more just and hopeful world.

While Jesuit Volunteers come to us from a variety of backgrounds, they all share a passion for facing the world's most difficult challenges with integrity, faith, and unflinching resolve. They care deeply about social justice, they aspire to discern where and how they are called to live out their lives, and they are open to having their hearts and minds changed by the work they do and the people they serve. These are young people trying to understand how to integrate these values fully into their daily lives. They are leaders, hungry to effect change in the world, but uncertain of the best course to do so. And they have humility, recognizing that they must learn and accompany before they can act and help.

Jesuit Volunteers commit to their term of service after an application process led by our admissions team (that includes JVC alumni) that pushes them to articulate their motivations and goals for pursuing service. They arrive at Orientation ready to immerse themselves in the values of spirituality, simple living, social justice, and community over their term of service.

Orientation is just the beginning of a yearlong program that, through retreats and local engagement, prepares Jesuit Volunteers to be young leaders committed to putting their faith and values into action. By incorporating tools and practices developed by the Jesuits through their history of work in solidarity with poor and marginalized communities, JVC provides Jesuit Volunteers with the framework for analysis and reflection that guides them long after their term of service ends.

The formation program supports and frames the key component of the volunteer experience: service. Jesuit Volunteers serve full-time with social service agencies and schools working with community members who are facing critical social and economic challenges. Our volunteers add capacity to nonprofits by serving in direct service roles acting as case managers, advocates, and teachers. They do community outreach and tend to the physical and emotional needs of the people they serve. Through their service, they learn firsthand about the social and structural obstacles that impede the well-being of individuals and families. Their service provides insight into the ways in which they can work to alleviate impact of poverty and gain a deeper understanding of its root causes. Living in community with other volunteers is source of support through a challenging year, provides an ongoing opportunity to reflect with others on their experience, and builds the foundation for life-long friendship with others who share their commitment and values.

Every day, our partner nonprofits are on the front lines of addressing the social and economic issues in the communities they serve. Having access to full-time volunteers who provide a continuum of services to those in need adds valuable capacity to help these organizations meet their missions. In addition, our nonprofit partners provide volunteers with the tools and training required to successfully carry out their duties. At least 75 percent of a Jesuit Volunteer's role must be in direct service: serving directly with individuals and families to provide access to critical services and support.

JVC's role is to challenge young people at a time in their lives when they are making important decisions about their future – pursuing an advanced degree, choosing a career, starting a family – and to provide what former volunteers consistently refer to as a life-changing experience. In this way, *service to others* becomes a way of life regardless of whether they choose to remain in a nonprofit corporation or pursue other vocations in the public or private sector.

Former Jesuit Volunteers are accomplished in every sector of society: they serve the public interest as members of Congress; they found and lead organizations at the forefront of social change; they have senior positions in the financial sector; former volunteers heal bodies and minds as medical and mental health professionals; and they pursue justice as lawyers and judges. Local alumni chapters exist in most major cities in the United States, serving as hubs for ongoing personal and professional development and networking. Alumni chapters provide former volunteers with the opportunity to stay in touch with the experience and community that have been so influential in their lives. The local gatherings provide another way for them to stay connected to the values and experiences of JVC well after they have finished their service.

Notable Jesuit Volunteer Corps alumni include Senator Bob Casey of Pennsylvania; Colorado Supreme Court Justice Monica Márquez; Jody Kent Lavy, Executive Director of the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth; Fr. Scott Santarosa, leader of the Western Province of the Society of Jesus; and Marilyn Pryle, 2019's Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year.

Senator Casey's time as a Jesuit Volunteer continues to inform his career as an elected leader. In his words:

While the experience was a challenge, I learned so much from my students and from the struggles of their families. Now, when I'm working on defending Medicaid or another program that helps people in low-income communities, they are not abstract policy matters. They are more real because of my experience in JVC, working with families who struggled to make ends

meet. It also helped me understand the trauma many communities confront and overcome alongside economic challenges in declining neighborhoods.

We are proud of the over 10,000 alumni who continue to build a more just and hopeful world by incorporating the values and experiences of JVC into their daily lives.

Federal government support could make volunteer service a more viable option for more young people

Like many nonprofits, JVC relies on a combination of earned and contributed revenue to sustain its mission. Our non-profit agency partners pay modest fees to help cover the direct costs of placing and supporting a Jesuit Volunteer. Contributed revenue, including donations and grants, allows us to keep costs to agencies as low as possible. Each agency partner saves, on average, about \$26,000 per year by hosting a Jesuit Volunteer.

With over 70 percent of our operating budget coming from earned revenue, largely in the form of agency fees, JVC's financial health is highly dependent on the recruitment of volunteers year over year. And as with many volunteer programs, the success of our recruitment efforts is counter-cyclical with the market. In a strong economy, an abundance of options in the private, public, and non-profit sectors presents attractive alternatives to a year of service, especially among a generation that is becoming increasingly risk averse. The increasing reality of student loan debt makes young people question the practicality of a year of service. Conversely, we have seen the interest in volunteerism peak in a weak economy, when young leaders have fewer options for paid employment.

By actively encouraging young adults to participate in service and providing incentives—such as student loan reduction—more broadly to young people who have the passion to serve in communities, the federal government can demonstrate its support for full-time service. And while the benefits of full-time service may be obvious to many of us in this space, organizations like ours would only benefit from public and private sector signaling that a service experience is valued or even preferred. Non-competitive eligibility and an education award for AmeriCorps and Peace Corps volunteers are good. However, we encourage and hope for these kind of resources to be made available more broadly that allow other young people to choose a year of service.

On behalf of the entire Jesuit Volunteer Community, I am grateful for the opportunity to address this Commission and for your leadership on this important issue. I look forward to reading your upcoming report. Thank you.