

**Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
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National Service Hearing: Improving Current National Service Policies and Processes

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Chairman Heck and Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today before this timely and important Commission hearing on creating more national service opportunities.

My name is Pierre Nguyen and I served for two terms in AmeriCorps, first in 2010 for the American Red Cross as their Disaster Preparedness Educator and again in 2013 with NCCC FEMA Corps as a Team Leader. Both experiences led me to my current service capacity as the Disaster Response Programs Manager for Texas Conservation Corps, part of American YouthWorks (AYW), based in Austin, Texas.

American YouthWorks was founded in 1975 and provides youth and young adults the resources to realize their full potential and affect positive change in their community. Through innovative education, leadership training, and service programming, students and participants are able to access tools instrumental to transforming their lives. In addition to my program, there are 130+ Corps across the country engaging AmeriCorps members and Corpsmembers in conservation, maintaining public lands, infrastructure, wildfire remediation, disaster response, and supporting resiliency and economic development needs in communities.

Corps have a rich lineage of national service traced back to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) what many consider the first national service program – created by President Roosevelt’s New Deal. Today’s Corps, most of which are nonprofits and are no longer federally operated, provide work-based service opportunities at many of the same natural resource and infrastructure sites as the CCC, but to a more diverse population – reflective of what America “looks” like today.

Both of my parents are refugees of the Vietnam War and growing up, I was encouraged to pursue a traditional and “reputable” career pathway – to be become a doctor, a lawyer, etc. Fleeing from a country torn apart by civil war, my parents naturally had a different perception of government and the military, so public service was not an area in which they encouraged exploration. In fact, I was unaware of opportunities to join AmeriCorps or a local organization within my own community and gain the work experience and skills that would ultimately help shape my professional and personal aspirations.

In spite of this, I’ve worked and volunteered for/with a number of service-based programs including the American Red Cross, All Hands Volunteers, Team Rubicon, the Dutchess County and NYC Medical Reserve Corps, World Cares Center, and various other disaster relief organizations. In my current role, I am able to work with other young people to inspire the next generation of change-makers.

Service programs provide exposure to people from different backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and race. Conflict resolution becomes paramount to the success of the group and one must learn to quickly adapt to challenging circumstances and work together, not against one another. Service experiences expedite the maturation process and Corpsmembers are forced to approach uncomfortable moments and resolve conflict because they are living, working, and sleeping with these individuals every day for months.

As a second generation Asian-American, I struggled a lot with communication. I never considered myself a leader. Some of this is a product of Asian culture. You're taught to submit and to respect your elders. My service helped facilitate my growth as a leader far more quickly than a normal 9-5 job because I was forced out of my comfort zone and made to face uncomfortable situations directly.

As both an AmeriCorps alum and current manager of a service program, I wanted to share some of the successes and challenges I've learned over nearly a decade of involvement within the national service community and offer some recommendations to create additional opportunities to serve and to ensure those opportunities meet the needs of diverse and underserved populations:

Improve Access to Service Opportunities for Diverse & Underserved Populations

For many, lack of awareness about what opportunities exist remains a barrier to service. My parents emphasized the importance of education and being an average student, I had limited options. After hopping from one college to another, I learned about AmeriCorps. While attending community college, I served in my first term of service with the American Red Cross. It was only during my term of service that I began to develop a new understanding of how my actions (going to school, serving in AmeriCorps) related to my role in the world. I saw renewed purpose behind those actions and began realizing a new sense of personal power, confidence, and excitement about the future. I now understood the need to complete my degree and obtain the qualifications necessary in the broader context of achieving my goals. There are many Americans in similar situations who would benefit from the chance to discover their passion and purpose through service – and to learn that they have other options to grow beyond the limitations of any circumstance.

National service has a branding and marketing problem. The totality of the benefits of service are not well-enough known to the populations that stand to benefit the most in some cases. For someone like myself, who was not a strong academic and found it hard to muster the motivation and drive to complete my education, understanding that there are more than one or two pathways to success would have helped foster my sense of purpose beyond the necessity of making a living and to support myself and my family.

I recommend more consistent branding of national service as a pathway with short and long term benefits and working to instill the same reverence that is associated with the military or obtaining a college degree. Fostering a culture that values service will only lead to more considering service as a viable option.

Modernize the AmeriCorps Education Award

After completing my terms of service I was able to earn an education award but was disappointed to find the value diminished significantly. For those who choose service as a means to help pay for school, the tax burden on the education award is significant. Additionally, to ensure maximum flexibility, use of the education award should be expanded to shorter-term programs that offer industry recognized credentials – an entry point to a career path.

Create More Service Opportunities through New or Expanded National Service Models

My various service positions have taken me all over the country and proved that there is no shortage of work to be done. Service programs are a necessary means to accomplishing this work but we must remain focused on aligning these programs to address the unmet project and human needs in our communities. We must be more intentional about promoting equity within new and existing opportunities to serve.

There is much that can be done to strengthen and increase service opportunities for all Americans, from all walks of life. Thank you again for the chance to testify before you today and for the ongoing hard work of the commission. I look forward to your questions.

Biography

Pierre Nguyen is a Disaster Response Programs Manager with Texas Conservation Corps, a program of American YouthWorks. Pierre brings with him nearly a decade of knowledge and experience in the nonprofit, emergency management and disaster response sectors. An AmeriCorps Alumni serving with both the American Red Cross and AmeriCorps NCCC, Pierre holds a B.S. in Emergency Management from Massachusetts Maritime Academy and is a MBA candidate at Southern New Hampshire University. In his free time, he serves as a mentor for Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Director of Communications for his neighborhood association, a foster parent for a local animal shelter, and provides care to patients as an Emergency Medical Technician.