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National Service Hearing: Creating More National Service Opportunities

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Chairman Heck and members of the Commission, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you.

My name is Brian Larkin, and I am an Associate Program Officer at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, which is headquartered in my hometown of Flint, Michigan.

My path to the Foundation was rooted in service. As a 21-year-old college graduate and member of a LISC AmeriCorps program, I was exposed to several different fields, including urban planning, community development, nonprofit management, local government, and community advocacy. I approached the position simply looking for a job close to home, but what I received greatly surpassed that. During my time as an AmeriCorps Member, I served at the Genesee County Land Bank, which is also located in Flint. Through that organization, I was able to do important work in neighborhoods, engage in public speaking, and connect with hundreds of residents actively working to improve their everyday surroundings.

At the conclusion of my year of service, I left with more than just an education award. I discovered my future career, reconnected with my hometown, and unlocked a passion for revitalizing Flint that has carried me through my professional journey thus far. It was an amazing experience that was mutually beneficial for me and my community.

I would like to add that my sister is a three-time AmeriCorps Alum, and my mother, who is a program officer with the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, is part of the service champions workgroup that helps to guide the growth and implementation of national service in Flint.

Based on my family's experiences, I believe more people should be afforded the opportunities that I received through national service. I also believe more places should benefit from the important role national service plays in communities like my hometown of Flint.

The narrative most people have heard about Flint is one of blight, crime, unemployment, poverty, and lead in the water. But there's a much more positive — often untold — story. A story of neighbors helping neighbors, of people of all backgrounds serving their community, and of alignment among the city, nonprofit partners, funders, schools, and residents to champion service as a strategy to reinvigorate the community. National service has been integral to this story.

In 2011, with support from the Mott Foundation, leaders from Flint’s nonprofit community — including the Community Foundation of Greater Flint and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Flint — established the Flint National Service Accelerator Initiative (the Accelerator). This strategy was based on a growing sense that, with more coordination, training, and community support, both the number of AmeriCorps members and their impact could be much greater.

What is the Accelerator, and how does it work?

In short, the Accelerator helps nonprofits capitalize on opportunities that exist through national service. Housed at the United Way of Genesee County, the Accelerator offers four main components:

Support for organizations

The Accelerator provides capacity-building support and other assistance local nonprofits need to recruit, assign, and train national service members. This begins with education and includes assistance with applying for national service slots, developing programs, recruiting members, and fulfilling reporting and monitoring requirements.

National Service Fund

Partnering with the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, the Accelerator administers the National Service Fund. The fund offsets costs, such as match and living stipends, for organizations that host AmeriCorps members and programs. This broadens impact because it allows national service to be an option for organizations that otherwise wouldn’t be able to cover the costs.

Place-based solutions

Along with locally designed AmeriCorps programs, the Accelerator identifies successful AmeriCorps initiatives from across the country and seeks ways to bring them to the local community to help respond to ongoing and emerging needs. In this way, existing state-wide and national programs have added or expanded member positions in Flint and Genesee County, and those members have been welcomed into Flint’s service infrastructure.

Member and alumni support

The Accelerator provides a wide range of professional development opportunities to national service members in Flint and Genesee County, helping members become successful during their service and as alumni. Examples of this include:

- monthly Accelerator meetings, which focus on topics such as entering the community, living on an AmeriCorps budget, and professionalism;
- Life After AmeriCorps Day, which provides members the opportunity to hear from AmeriCorps Alums, participate in workshops with local employers, gain skills in networking, writing résumés, and interviewing, and develop a better understanding of how to utilize an education award;
- training in grant writing; and
- matching second- or third-term members with mentors who provide one-on-one guidance to help them make the most of their remaining time in AmeriCorps and successfully transition to their next opportunity.

In addition, once members have completed their year of service, the Accelerator continues to support and engage AmeriCorps Alums in trainings, networking activities, and mentoring current service members.

Impact of the Accelerator on the community

Through the Accelerator's efforts to create new programs and secure additional member slots to address pressing needs, the national service presence in Flint has increased eightfold since 2011. Starting with 25 members and one Flint-based AmeriCorps program, the Accelerator now has approximately 200 AmeriCorps members and six Flint-based AmeriCorps programs working to address challenges in education, opioid abuse, public safety, and more. There are also three Senior Corps programs with nearly 250 members serving three counties. Most of these national service members are residents of Flint and Genesee County, serving their neighbors in their own backyard. Because they are utilizing their living stipends, education awards, and professional development opportunities locally, they also are helping to create a talent pipeline for an upcoming generation of nonprofit, for-profit, and community leaders.

Here are a few examples:

In 2013, Flint residents came together to develop the city's first comprehensive Master Plan in more than 50 years — one that is explicit about the community's desires for civic engagement and resident empowerment strategies. The plan calls for several key actions the city would have been unable to implement with its capacity alone. As a result, the Accelerator has worked with the city and residents to establish a VISTA Program housed in City Hall to build capacity for ongoing implementation of the plan.

When Flint's water crisis was declared a federal emergency in January of 2016, the Accelerator had the infrastructure and systems in place to respond quickly. Working with the Corporation for National and Community Service and its Michigan Field Office, as well as the Michigan Community Service Commission, the Accelerator reassigned members and hosted several AmeriCorps NCCC teams to assist in responding to urgent needs related to the crisis.

AmeriCorps members were among the first people on the ground providing much-needed services, such as the distribution of water and filters and coordination of volunteer efforts. Today, AmeriCorps members continue to help with recovery efforts, serving in Flint schools to support students' and families' long-term needs, strengthening neighborhoods through resident outreach, helping residents gain access to lead-mitigating foods, and being a resource to nonprofits through the newly created Flint Recovery Corps.

National service members in Flint also continue to play critical roles in community-building activities, including tutoring and mentoring students, connecting residents with economic opportunities, creating community safety groups, and eliminating blight — all of which help to support and reinvigorate the city. To help paint the full picture, I would like to share some of the accomplishments from the 450 members and highlight one of the many success stories showcasing the effectiveness of the Accelerator.

Here is just some of what members accomplished in the past year alone:

- They provided more than 6,350 hours of literacy tutoring for 220 students.
- They conducted 25 street clean-up efforts along 18 miles of road.
- They disseminated information about mitigating the effects of lead-exposure to more than 8,000 residents.
- They provided capacity-building services to 42 neighborhood groups and nonprofits to help them implement the city's Master Plan.
- And they helped 2,212 individuals continue to live independently.

Partnering with the Accelerator, the City of Flint Police worked with three AmeriCorps NCCC teams during the past year, which contributed to a 15 percent decrease in violent crimes compared with previous years. Members have worked side by side with the city's blight department and safety officers to board up houses, remove brush, improve sight lines, pick up trash, mow vacant lots, and report street light outages and abandoned vehicles. Team members also knocked on doors to speak with residents and helped them create or revive neighborhood groups. As a result of this partnership, members of the three AmeriCorps NCCC teams boarded up 677 homes, removed 51,585 pounds of trash, distributed 416 information packets and 80 water filters, and reached out to 52 neighborhood groups.

Thanks to the collaboration that occurs among AmeriCorps members at monthly meetings, local nonprofit organizations began coordinating their services more effectively. The collaboration has since taken root within the organizations and is having a long-term impact on efforts to address community needs, deliver services, and increase civic engagement.

The Accelerator has put Flint at the forefront of current efforts to model a place-based approach to national service. It continues to attract national attention and is now being replicated in other cities and states.

The Mott Foundation's national support for growing AmeriCorps

The Mott Foundation recognizes the value of national service as a vehicle to support our grantmaking strategies — both in our hometown of Flint and communities across the country. To the latter end, we support a national AmeriCorps VISTA program through the Afterschool Alliance, an organization that serves as a voice for the field and a conduit to national, state, and local afterschool entities.

The VISTA program works to build the capacity of the Mott Foundation's 50-Statewide Afterschool Networks and, by extension, afterschool programs nationwide. As in Flint, Mott provides support for the required match and robust professional development opportunities, as well as assistance in recruiting members and fulfilling reporting and monitoring requirements.

The Foundation also funds America's Service Commissions to support State Service Commissions working with their Statewide Afterschool Networks to expand afterschool opportunities through national service. Thus far, five new AmeriCorps programs are launching,

and four State Service Commissions are making afterschool a funding priority. We anticipate additional opportunities will be forthcoming.

Why does the Mott Foundation support national service?

AmeriCorps members “Get Things Done.” We have witnessed how their contributions leave a lasting impact on the people they work with, the communities they serve, and the members’ own lives.

In addition, the Mott Foundation has been able to leverage our grant funding through our partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service. In 2018, Foundation grants of \$645,000 leveraged approximately \$2.6 million to support national service in Flint. That’s a fourfold return on investment.

We support the Accelerator locally and the AmeriCorps VISTA program nationally to help our grantees have a greater impact on the issues we all care about. AmeriCorps members provide our grantees with the additional tools and capacity they need to accomplish their goals.

National service also creates lasting benefits — both for members and the communities they serve. Because the Accelerator provides training and professional development as members gain real-world experience, it has become a pipeline for the region’s workforce. AmeriCorps education awards also have helped to propel members to enroll — or re-enroll — in local higher education institutions.

Thank you!

On behalf of the Mott Foundation, I would like to extend special thanks to the Corporation for National and Community Service, its Michigan Field Office, and the Michigan Community Service Commission for their ongoing partnership and support. Flint would not be as far along in recovery efforts were it not for the dedicated and passionate members of AmeriCorps and Senior Corps who have been serving in the community.

Before the Accelerator was established, fewer than 25 members were serving in Flint. Today, Flint has approximately 450 national service members, as well as hundreds of volunteers those members have recruited, working to build a stronger and more vibrant community.

The Mott Foundation has seen the power of national service, and we have been pleased to invest in its growth. We continue to support and encourage the important role the Corporation for National and Community Service plays in creating and growing national service opportunities, and we invite the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service to visit Flint to see a model that could be replicated in other communities with support from public-private partnerships.

Thank you for your attention.
Brian R. Larkin