

**Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
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National Service Hearing: Creating More National Service Opportunities

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Dear Chairman Heck, Vice Chairs Gearan and Wada, and members of the Commission:

I am honored to appear before you to provide testimony as the Commission considers its policy options with respect to national service and, specifically, how we might create more national service opportunities. This public discussion sparked by your work to foster a greater ethos of service to strengthen American democracy is timely and long overdue. We have come to equate service in our country with military service. In reality, service is much broader and civilian national service has been a largely untapped resource to meet the Nation's 21st century needs. Equally important, civilian national service is a powerful strategy to yield real change in communities across the country.

I have been deeply involved in national service policy for more than three decades. I helped start AmeriCorps many years ago and had the honor of serving Senator Kennedy as a Labor Committee staff person and serving as an appointee in the first Bush and Clinton Administrations. Since that time, I have seen civilian national service programs play a vital role in leveraging youth from all demographics to tackle challenges including education, disaster relief, and the country's most recent drug crisis—the opioid epidemic. In education, for example, national service puts talented teachers in the classroom, offers struggling students one-on-one attention, and brings supportive services and after school programs to urban schools. In the decade after Hurricane Katrina, corps members built or refurbished 15,000 homes, removed more than 17,000 tons of debris, and helped revitalize both the education and nonprofit sectors in New Orleans. More recently, over 1,200 national service members have been deployed across the country to serve in programs that support substance abuse prevention, reduction and recovery from addiction to help combat the opioid epidemic.

At Service Year Alliance, where I serve as the CEO, we work with the field to build the infrastructure necessary to ensure that national service is a common expectation and opportunity for all young Americans who want to serve. Our vision is shaped in large part by our Board Chair, General (Ret.) Stan McChrystal, who believes our country needs large-scale voluntary civilian national service to engage more Americans in serving community and country. He often refers to civilian national service and military service as “two sides of the same coin.” We approach our work through three lenses: 1) supporting communities that commit to make a year of service a common expectation and opportunity, 2) developing more high-quality service opportunities, and 3) ensuring that all young people have an opportunity to serve regardless of their background.

My testimony will focus on those themes, which I believe are critical to scaling national service programs.

However, we must do more than that if we want to build something that is truly transformational. We have had decades of experience with national service programs and have seen the development of powerful individual programs addressing individual issue areas. Programs, however, have not been taken to scale and key pieces of infrastructure have not been built. At the end of the day, we cannot simply make tweaks and incremental investments in the existing national service system. We need to build on this foundation, adjusting our approach, investments, and policies, to create a more robust system that can transform the country.

Supporting Communities that Commit to Make a Year of Service a Common Expectation and Opportunity

While thousands of national service programs operate today across the country and around the world, nowhere in America is a year of service a common expectation and opportunity. Nowhere do we connect military and civilian service in a significant way. Nowhere is civilian service rewarded with employment and educational opportunity. And nowhere do we continue to engage national service alums as important community assets.

Changing these mindsets can't be done at the national level all at once. We believe a community-based approach is the best way to test the power of service years to solve problems, change lives, and transform communities. Such an approach would drive resources to communities that raise their hands, agreeing to prepare young Americans for future service, connect military and public service, provide young people with the choice of where and whether to do a term of service, reward them for their service with increased opportunity, and continue to engage them as a community asset after their term of service ends.

Service Year Alliance has been working with ten communities to help them create the conditions to scale service locally. These communities have become true partners in this work and have developed plans to support the intentional growth of national service programs to address issues specific to their community. In Austin, Texas, for example, the Austin Service Year Impact Community has formed a coalition of nonprofits and local government programs to pioneer diversity and inclusion efforts to create more equitable models for service, while working directly with local employers to address the local skills gaps through service. In Kentucky, a Service Year Impact Community of 54 counties in rural Appalachia is working to improve educational outcomes from cradle to career and use national service as a strategy to train the future workforce for the state. With time, we believe these communities will become models of what is possible when you invest concentrated efforts in communities to achieve measurable community-defined results.

We believe this is the right approach for a few reasons. We cannot scale to more than a million service opportunities overnight, and we need to create a scalable system without creating new bureaucracy. This community-based approach would support intentional growth through communities that have developed state and local plans for approval by the Corporation for National and Community Service.

The state and local plans would include strategies for:

- Engaging a broad cross-section of community stakeholders in the effort, including schools, colleges, employers, nonprofits, public agencies, existing national service programs and young people;
- Building the expectation of service among youth and asking them to choose among a range of opportunities, including military and civilian national service, that are easy to identify using technology;
- Addressing local challenges through national service;
- Providing benefits to young people who serve, such as housing, and work with higher education, employers, and small businesses to locally promote, incentivize and reward service; and
- Engaging and connecting civilian national service alumni and military veterans post-service.

This new model will also help increase awareness of national service opportunities. As highlighted in your staff memo, our current system of national service is complex and decentralized. Woven into the fabric of each community plan would be a blueprint for ensuring service is a common expectation for young people. Plans would include strategies for ensuring that beginning no later than middle school, young people in the community would be made aware of and encouraged to commit to a term of service in the military, in civilian national service, or in a public service job, and provided information relating to the various terms and benefits of such options. Plans would also include information about how communities will make positions easy to identify using technology. I should add that the necessary technology is readily available at a low-cost through ServiceYear.org, the platform that we run.

Creating More High Quality Service Opportunities

In 2009, the bipartisan Serve America Act authorized an increase in the number of AmeriCorps positions—from approximately 75,000 to 250,000. Unfortunately, the authorized growth target has not been met due to inadequate funding to support that growth. Federal budget challenges and competing policy priorities have kept the number of AmeriCorps positions relatively flat despite demand from young people who want to serve. In fact, we know based on multiple polls that a minimum of 25% of young Americans — or 1 million a year — would serve if asked and given the opportunity.

We also know that public money leverages private resources dollar for dollar. The existing field of AmeriCorps programs is poised to grow. Last year, Service Year Alliance, Voices for National Service, and America's Service Commissions partnered to survey national service programs to assess the amount of funding programs would request without funding constraints. Our analysis showed that respondents would request an average of \$1,108,000, or an additional 66%, in funding to scale up successful programs. We have called for funding to increase

AmeriCorps to 100,000 positions this year, and believe that similar growth could be achieved every year until scale is attained.

However, we also need to tackle structural issues that have limited the growth of privately funded service year programs. The AmeriCorps education and student loan repayment benefits are not available to participants in privately funded service programs. There is also confusion in the field surrounding the Fair Labor Standard Act's applicability to non-AmeriCorps programs. Organizations must seek individual rulings at the federal level and, in many cases, at the state and local levels in order to pay their members a participant living allowance rather than an hourly wage. This structure limits growth and presents no clear on-ramp for thousands of programs that are essentially identical to AmeriCorps programs, but exist independently of the federal government.

Similarly, privately funded programs would receive a boost if education benefits were available to their corps members. A system could be established similar to the current system for approval of higher education institutions to receive federal financial aid. In higher education, the federal Department of Education approves accreditation agencies, which in turn accredit higher education institutions, making them eligible to participate in the federal financial aid program. Using a similar model, a system for approval of civilian service positions could enable the lead federal agency to approve non-federal agencies to review and certify prospective positions. As with higher education accreditation, the cost of this review could be funded through fees charged to organizations seeking approval. A certification process for national service programs would provide the infrastructure for growth and the creation of new programs that meet the current quality standards. Under this model, national service members who successfully complete a term of service in a certified program would be eligible to receive educational benefits, which would increase the value proposition for service at scale.

Many of the policy proposals set forth in the staff memo are also important pieces of the puzzle, but require some modification if scale is to be achieved. For example, proposals that encourage federal agencies to create civilian national service programs similar to FEMA Corps—a policy we wholeheartedly support—will be limited to a set number federal agencies leveraging national service as part of a strategy to achieve their respective missions. Likewise, proposals to provide tax incentives for organizations investing within Opportunity Zones will be limited to communities within designated opportunity zones, which represent just twelve percent of the U.S. Census tracts. We believe these are important policies, but we must do more to inspire that greater ethos of service that the Commission aspires to achieve.

Ensuring All Young People Can Serve

Last but not least, I believe that every young person should have an opportunity to serve, regardless of their background. Opportunity Youth, sometimes referred to as disconnected youth, comprise nearly 4.6 million American youth aged 16 – 24 who are neither in school nor employed and often face the largest barriers to service. Many of these young people face barriers built by extreme poverty. Some have criminal records. Others are teen parents. Many have spent time in foster care. I am pleased to see that the Commission is considering policy

recommendations that would increase investments in programs that intentionally engage Opportunity Youth, including YouthBuild and Conservation Corps; policies that make programs more accessible to Opportunity Youth who have been court-involved; policies that provide critical wraparound services; and a more flexible childcare allowance. In addition, I am pleased to see that the Commission is considering proposals that will increase the value proposition for national service for all young people, including increasing the living allowance, exempting the education award from taxation, and encouraging institutions of higher education to recognize and encourage service opportunities.

We recently released research conducted for Service Year Alliance by Burning Glass Technologies, which examined the career paths of service year alumni compared to peers who didn't have service year experiences. The research revealed that service year alums have different education and career experiences than their peers in several ways:

- Service year alums go on to complete bachelor's degrees at higher rates than their peers. Almost a quarter (24%) of service year alumni who do not have a bachelor's degree during their service go on to earn a bachelor's degree.
- Service year alums are more likely than their peers to work in education, and community and social services occupations.
- Service year alums are more likely than their peers to cite skills related to leadership and organization on their resumes.

As unemployment rates for youth ages 16-24 remain double the national average, national service programs provide a powerful pathway to education and career opportunities for disconnected youth. Service Year Alliance recently hosted a Summit of more than one hundred policy makers, thought leaders, employers, and Opportunity Youth. The Summit focused on the role national service programs play in upskilling and creating career pathways, credentials, and social capital for Opportunity Youth. The theme we heard throughout the day is that these young people are eager to serve, gain valuable work experience, and positively impact their communities. We encourage the Commission to continue to explore policies and practices that will maximize the potential for national service programs to impact Opportunity Youth.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to the Commission today. With your leadership, we can take the next step toward solving many of our most pressing problems by better deploying the time and talents of Americans of all ages to serve their communities and the country.