



**RECOMMENDATIONS FROM OPPORTUNITY YOUTH UNITED
to the
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, and PUBLIC SERVICE**

April 30, 2019

Introduction:

We strongly support the Commission's intention to make various forms of service available to all Americans. We thank you all for your service!

We also believe that the interim report from the Commission could be improved by emphasizing the various ways to expand national service opportunities for Americans raised and/or living within low-income and marginalized communities so they can be members of national service programs serving in their own communities.

This memo outlines our various priorities and suggestions for policies that will improve and expand the national service system to engage Opportunity Youth and other low-income people as service-givers in our own communities.

Background:

The National Council of Young Leaders (NCYL) is the strategic decision-making body for Opportunity Youth United (OYUnited), a national movement to increase opportunity and decrease poverty in America. Members of our Council grew up in low-income families and communities enduring all the challenges of poverty. We have now organized a national network of young adults working with allies from all backgrounds, called Opportunity Youth United, to influence public officials and corporate leaders to improve the conditions in our communities.

We have all had the good fortune to access and leverage the opportunities provided by local programs run by public and non-profit organizations dedicated to providing pathways out of poverty, connecting young people with education, employment, national service, and community leadership. These pathways have included national service programs like AmeriCorps, VISTA, Service and Conservation Corps, YouthBuild, Public Allies, College Advising Corps, City Year, and National Guard Youth Challenge program.

Since these programs have served as a stepping stone towards respected roles as service providers and leaders in our communities, we are committed to supporting the expansion of service opportunities for young people, adults, and seniors living in poverty and low-income communities, to serve their own communities. National service opportunities need to build equity - to enable all Americans, including those from marginalized backgrounds and communities, to serve in their communities, step into responsible servant-leader roles, and create the changes that will improve the lives of their families,

peers, and neighbors. Serving in their communities builds local power and capacity, and increases sustainability. National service should be equity-focused and should not be primarily, intentionally or unintentionally, accessible to people from the middle and upper classes who can afford to give their time and can, therefore, come to our communities as part of national service.

We want the chance to serve and transform our own communities, to discover the deep soul experience of service that transforms a person's identity and life.

I) IMPROVEMENTS RECOMMENDED FOR EXISTING PROGRAMS THAT ENGAGE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

A. Stronger Supports and Intentional Transition to Post-Secondary Education and Employment:

Adequate personal and professional supports through mentorship, training, accountability partners, academic preparation, transition planning, career planning, placement, and personal and professional development are needed.

Some national service programs have been described as filling a “gap year,” from high school to college, or college to career. This description applies for people whose access to college is secure. For Opportunity Youth, who are the 4.6 million young people who are disconnected from school and work but who are seeking opportunity and who offer an opportunity to our nation if it would invest in them, the service year is more like a “*bridge year*,” or a “reconnecting year.” We want to see these bridge years expanded and designed to strategically serve as an opportunity for re-connection. They are life-changing. Paid service through which employment skills and discipline are learned and the joy of service is experienced is transformative.

However, the Bridge Year service programs should be improved by adding ***a more intentional process of connecting the members to post-secondary education and/or employment***. Some programs already do this well, but there should be a standard for all. There are research findings suggesting a requirement that every host organization supporting a National Service member should actually have a transition plan from service to employment – an ***exit strategy*** for members that includes more support for our servant journey, and ***a year of mentorship*** toward applying what we have learned through serving.

There should be deliberate ***training of transitional skills*** and trainings with ***credentials*** that can catapult us into the particular career or organization we choose. For those who enter without a high school diploma, an academic program for the HSE is essential, and AmeriCorps should allow this to take up more than 20% of program time.

B. Support Transitions through Effective Messaging to Employers and Universities:

There should be an effective marketing campaign that uplifts the actual service alumni members have given and the values and skills that they represent and hold, to employers.

C. Encourage Universities to Provide Matching or Complementary Scholarships to Graduates of Service Programs

Universities could be encouraged to provide supplemental or matching scholarships to graduates of service programs. The Segal Education Award goes a long way towards increasing affordability of

post-secondary opportunities; however, it is not sufficient to create equitable opportunities to all service members especially those from low-income backgrounds.

D. Ensure True Access to All:

It's one thing to say, "Access to all." But the words do not equate to reality. We need to keep in mind some of the barriers we face. Access for everyone would mean thinking through the realities for court-involved youth, people with disabilities, youth in foster care, young people who left high school without a diploma. Let's make sure we're not leaving out buckets of Opportunity Youth even though we're saying "access to all." We need to address these barriers within the program: for example, young people without a high school diploma will need to spend more than 20% of their time working toward their high school equivalency diploma; young people with a criminal record will need not to be excluded and will need help expunging their records; young people who have experienced trauma, will need healing processes built into the programs. All Opportunity Youth will need training in financial management, savings, and how to avoid excessive college debt.

Service as a re-entry pathway for incarcerated young adults should be expanded, and deliberately made available and communicated to young people while they are incarcerated, with a direct channel to enrollment.

E. Increase the Living Allowance for Low-income Members

The pay is very low. **Could there be a sliding scale based on socio-economic status?** There are those who volunteer because they have the time and resources; on the other hand, there are many who volunteer to build their capacity and to serve their own communities while working to gain the skills to overcome poverty. There are rich kids who want to help the world, who have the privilege and the extra resources to do it. For those with privilege, the current Living Allowance may suffice. For young people from low-income communities, whose families are suffering and often lack any surplus resources, they would benefit from a higher pay scale.

Originally VISTA was created for privileged people to spend time in poverty in order to learn by walking in the shoes of people without privilege, shoes like ours. Could we be given the opportunity to step into the shoes of people with resources?

F. Eliminate Taxation on the Ed Award

The Ed Award is not enough to pay for the full costs of college. Taxation on it should be eliminated.

G. Increase the Flexibility of Service Length for Low-income Members

We are aware of situations where AmeriCorps members lost their hard-earned education awards because they didn't dare end their year of service without having a job lined up immediately, and when offered a job they took it. If the Ed Award could be awarded proportional to the time served, after a basic minimum amount of time was completed, it could be extremely helpful.

H. Consider Increasing the Ed Award and/or Living Allowance for More Dangerous Types of Service

Some service members are doing disaster relief, are serving as first responders and other service positions with comparable expectations and responsibilities. These are closer to military service in terms of the risks involved. Should they receive higher compensation?

I. Consider Allowing AmeriCorps Members to Opt for a Cash Payment instead of Using their Ed Award for Post-secondary Education

An Ed Award is an extremely important way to create access to college and other post-secondary opportunities, but there are circumstances in which being able to obtain cash in exchange for the Ed Award would be critical for members to eliminate barriers that prevent post-secondary access or economic stability. Pressing economic needs, transportation, home ownership, or entrepreneurial business development would sometimes take priority if the option were available.

J. Increase Recruitment in Low-income Communities and in Communities of Color for Service Opportunities

Similar to the way the military invests in recruitment of individuals to join the military, we urge that the Corporation for National and Community Service invest in recruiting young adults and especially Opportunity Youth to service years through general promotion and active outreach in local communities.

II) EXPANSION OF EXISTING SUCCESSFUL NATIONAL SERVICE PROGRAMS AND RE-STATEMENT OF PREVIOUS SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

A. Expand All Existing Successful Programs

AmeriCorps, VISTA, Service and Conservation Corps, YouthBuild, Senior Corps, NCCC, National Guard Youth Challenge Program, and others should all be expanded. The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009 instructed CNCS to expand to 250,000 AmeriCorps members by 2017, but there are still only 75,000 members a year, due solely to funding limitations.

The YouthBuild program authorized under the US DOL is currently funded at just \$85M, serving less than 200 communities even though over 2,000 community-based organizations have applied to bring this service and job training opportunity to their communities. The capacity and the demand exist for major expansion of existing programs.

Currently only 1% of Americans are serving in the military, and only 7% of our total population were veterans in 2016. An even smaller number have participated in national service. To make service to our nation the accepted norm in society, national service will need to be dramatically expanded.

B) Re-Establish The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)

The CCC provided direct training and employment to more than three million young men who in ten years built eight hundred parks and planted over one billion trees. The CCC was responsible for over half the reforestation, public and private, done in the nation's history. Sadly, the CCC was segregated, discriminated against black men, and was closed entirely to women, and even after an effort was

undertaken to correct the racial discrimination, by 1936 black participation was up to only 10 percent. Imagine a new and improved CCC in the present, absent of discrimination and exclusion, and supportivet of the nonprofit organizations that have emerged to fill this space. The Corps Network, the national association of service and conservation corps across the country that grew out of the CCC and are now supported by a combination of local, state, federal, and private funding, has long advocated for the reestablishment of a CCC-like program to support the current network of nonprofits and engage thousands more diverse young adults, including Opportunity Youth and veterans.

III) CREATION OF NEW COMMUNITY-DRIVEN AND COMMUNITY-LED PROGRAMS, EMPOWERING RESIDENTS to SERVE, LEAD, and GROW CAPACITY WITHIN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES

A) Create a separate funding stream for rural and tribal communities that would decrease or waive matching requirements for AmeriCorps grants.

Rural and Tribal communities often are unable to meet matching requirements for AmeriCorps grants. The current matching requirements create uneven access where low-income communities are unable to access service opportunities.

In this context, uplift and acknowledge as equivalent to financial match, the extraordinary commitments of volunteers who give time and emotional support to creative service projects in their communities; recognize the value of non-traditional supports, resources, and services from local residents.

B) Strengthen Support for Rural and Tribal Communities to Build Non-Profit Leadership Capacity:

Many rural and tribal communities lack strong non-profit organizations able to serve as viable fiscal sponsors, and also lack the trained leadership needed to produce such nonprofits. Deliberate, staged, multi-year national training programs need to be developed for up-coming community leaders who might be identified through existing AmeriCorps and VISTA programs.

C. Create a Robust Funding Stream for Community Improvement Projects Designed by Members of the Local Community

In communities that do have viable fiscal sponsors and local leaders, a direct funding stream from CNCS should be available for them to organize residents, to conceive of the needed projects addressing high priority issues, and to pay residents for day-to-day full-time service implementing projects of their own design. Creative ideas and enormous energy to improve living conditions lie waiting among residents of marginalized communities if the local nonprofits were given the resources to support them.

For example, the original YouthBuild program was conceived in 1978 in East Harlem by teenagers organized by one full-time organizer sponsored by a local nonprofit, funded under the Community Anti-Crime Program (CACP) of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, written by Congressman John Conyers. The CACP was designed to diminish crime through community engagement in a variety of community improvement projects. The teenagers were paid by CETA. The paid organizer raised the additional necessary funds from public and private sources to hire unemployed young men and women to work with professionals on a gut

rehabilitation of an abandoned building to create 10 units of housing for homeless and low-income people in the neighborhood. The project would have been impossible without the basic CACP funds and CETA. Neither of these funding streams exists at present.

Similar funding streams should be created to generate wonderful new community-based projects conceived of, designed, and implemented by local community residents supported by paid organizers.

D. Expand the Cities of Service Model supported by Mayors around the Country and the Mayor and Governor Initiative Run by CNCS

Supporting Mayors and Governors to convene their citizens to work together to solve their cities' problems is working well where we have witnessed it, and we recommend expansion. Both the Cities of Service and the CNCS Mayor and Governor Initiative should be expanded.

Examples of the Mayor and Governor Initiative can be found here:

https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/AmeriCorps_Governor_and_Mayor_Initiative.pdf

IV) STRENGTHENING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MILITARY AND NATIONAL SERVICE

A. Link Military and National Service Together to Increase Public Awareness and Value

Could all the forms of service be combined under one umbrella in a way that gives equal awareness and value to them? All the people serving – the First Responders, Veterans, AmeriCorps members, participants in The Corps Network's FEMA responses, YouthBuild members, other national service members – are all stepping up to serve their country in important ways. Yet the annual budget for national service is often on the cutting board while the budget for military service is not.

If we really try to look at how they are all similar and focus on those similarities it would strengthen our stance as civic engagers and uplift all the important service we do.

Another argument for a better and more united communication process is that when we're looking at job opportunities employers don't know what AmeriCorps is. Being a veteran implies a level of professionalism, self-discipline, self-sacrifice in service to others that benefits a resume. Many of our AmeriCorps alumni have the same discipline and know how to step up but they aren't recognized. We want our service to be seen as an asset, not just by the small number of people who already know all about it. The service movement should generate a campaign to build this awareness.

B. Promote National Service as a Healing Option for Veterans

We also find that for returning Veterans national service can be a bridge back into society that honors their will to serve but helps to heal the trauma from military conflict. This opportunity should be widely communicated, and domestic opportunities for Veterans to serve should be expanded, similar to the returning Veterans program of The Corps Network.

C. Promote Military Service as a Career Development Option for Opportunity Youth

Many Opportunity Youth who would like to join the military are not eligible. Some do not have high school diplomas; some have criminal records; some have disabilities. The national service programs can help them obtain the diplomas, and be a path into military service. The GI Bill then can provide them with a full college education that allows them to serve professionally for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps the military eligibility process should be modified to honor national service in a way that deliberately strengthens the likelihood of military recruiters granting eligibility waivers to individuals with prior criminal convictions.

In Closing:

We look forward to talking with members of the Commission about these recommendations and about our own experiences with service as a transformational experience. We will be happy to work with you in promoting any of these specific recommendations going forward.

These Recommendations were developed collectively by the Following Members of the OYUnited National Council of Young Leaders (NCYL) and OYUnited Community Leaders (CL):

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