STAFF MEMORANDUM: AN INFRASTRUCTURE TO SERVE AMERICA

This staff memorandum does not represent official findings or recommendations of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service (the "Commission"). Authored by the Commission's staff, the memorandum presents preliminary summaries of research and analysis that the Commission may consider as it develops its recommendations for the Congress, the President, and the American public.

Relevant memoranda will be released in conjunction with the Commission's public hearings. Staff encourages those with views on issues under discussion during the hearings to provide their input to the Commission at www.inspire2serve.gov and stands ready to revise its current understanding of these issues in light of new information as the Commission's work continues.

Background

The June 20, 2019, public hearings provide an opportunity for public discussion of policy options the Commission is considering with respect to creating an expectation of service. Among other things, Congress tasked the Commission to "consider methods to increase participation in military, national, and public service in order to address national security and other public service needs of the Nation," as well as identifying "means by which to foster a greater attitude and ethos of service among United States youth."[1] The policy option outlined below offers one way to develop an ethos of service to meet the needs of the nation.

Policy Option: Voluntary Service Registration System

A service registration system would provide a place that could connect Americans with organizations and opportunities in military, national, and public service. Opportunities may include employment, participation in termed service programs, service sabbaticals, and emergency response needs. The system would also allow service organizations—including the U.S. military; federal, state, local, and tribal governments; and national service programs, such as AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, FEMA Corps, and certified nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations—to identify and facilitate recruitment of candidates to meet their needs.[2]

Individuals who choose to register with the system would provide baseline contact and identification information along with information related to service program eligibility, personal interests, educational background, skills (such as certifications earned), and service preferences. The system would allow individuals to update this information, as well as elect the type of information they receive from, and share with, participating organizations. It would also build in privacy protection measures and restrict database access to only authorized organizations.

---

[1] National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, Title V, Subtitle F, Section 551.

[2] Many alternative approaches to instituting certification processes for non-profit and non-governmental organizations exist, including state, local, or federal certifying organizations, third-party certifiers, or a public-private partnership model. While the specific approach to certification remains undefined, the Commission welcomes feedback on the matter.

Americans would be able to register directly with the voluntary service system to explore opportunities to serve in military, national, and public service. Alternatively, while the voluntary service registration system is envisioned to operate independently of the Selective Service System (SSS), the proposal incorporates the option for individuals to "opt in" to the service registration system during the SSS registration process. Furthermore, service organizations affiliated with the voluntary service system would be able to provide information to the SSS for distribution to individuals who have registered with SSS.

The primary objectives of the service registration system are to increase Americans' awareness of service opportunities and organizations and to provide a centralized resource to assist service organizations in identifying and mobilizing individuals from across the country with skills required to meet national and community needs.
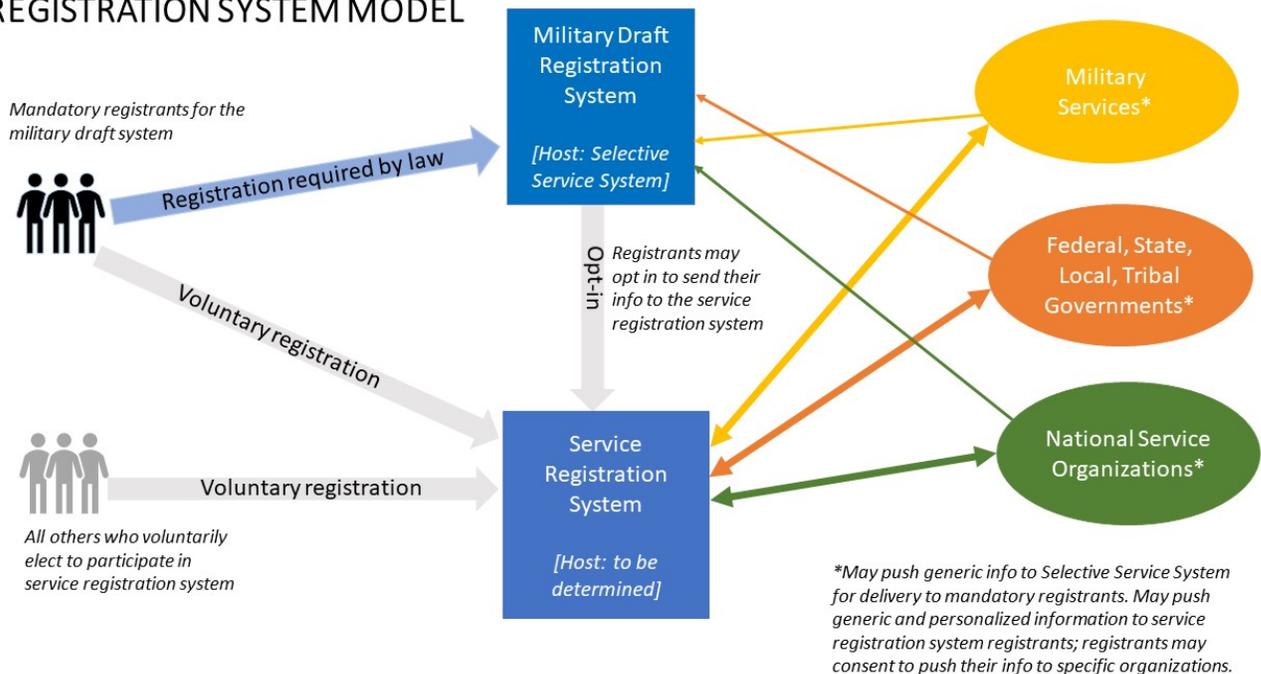
The afternoon June hearing is meant to showcase expert debate on this proposal and encourage public discussion and feedback. To inform the discussion, this memorandum outlines some of the issues surrounding a service registration system.

Issues to Consider

Value and Purpose

As discussed above, the objectives of a service registration system are to increase Americans' awareness of service opportunities and organizations and to provide a centralized resource to

assist service organizations in identifying and mobilizing individuals from across the country with skills required to meet national and community needs. The value of such a system rests on a key assumption that the lack of awareness regarding service opportunities is a significant barrier to service.

Advocates for such a system note that although many Americans are aware of national service organizations with strong branding, such as Peace Corps, Teach For America, or Habitat For Humanity, most are unaware of the plethora of other opportunities funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service. Similarly, the military reports both a lack of understanding of service opportunities, with a 2015 Military Ad Tracking Reserve study indicating that just 17 percent of young adults could name all five military service branches, as well as an often inaccurate understanding of available occupations based on movies, television, and media portrayals of military life. [3,4] Supporters of a service registration system contend that increasing awareness of service opportunities will encourage increased numbers of individuals to serve their country in military, national, and public service – which in turn will create a cultural expectation of service over time.[5]

Others question whether lack of awareness constitutes the primary barrier to creating a culture of service or how a centralized service registration system would meaningfully increase awareness. In addition, some question whether federal dollars might be better suited to improving the experience of those currently participating in service programs or funding more service positions, particularly in national service where hundreds of thousands of applicants are turned away each year.[6] Skeptics of a service registration system may argue that creating a new system would duplicate existing awareness efforts without increasing effectiveness. In addition, by increasing awareness without providing means to increase the number of opportunities or resolve other endemic issues that prevent those interested from accessing service programs, opponents might contend a service registration system would only increase competition for service positions and exacerbate existing problems that create barriers to service.

The Selective Service System

The Commission is currently deliberating, and has yet to make a recommendation on, the existence or future structure of the SSS. The existence of the SSS and the status of Selective Service's registration cohort—such as age, gender, and other factors that determine who is obliged to register for SSS—necessarily bears on the efficacy of a potential service registration system by limiting or expanding the number of individuals who are prompted to "opt in" while

---

[3] Tom Philpott, "Myths Seen Distorting Military's Image with Nation's Youth," *Military Officer Association of America*, http://www.moaa.org/Content/Publications-and-Media/News-Articles/2018-Military-Update/Myths-Seen-Distorting-Military-s-Image-with-Nation-s-Youth.aspx.

[4] Amy Schafer, *Generations of War: The Rise of the Warrior Caste & the All-Volunteer Force*, Center for a New American Security (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2018), https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/generations-of-war.

[5] Marc Magee, *From Selective Service to National Service: A Blueprint for Citizenship and Security in the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Progressive Policy Institute, July 2003).

[6] *A 21st Century National Service System: Plan of Action* (Washington D.C.: The Aspen Institute and Franklin Project, June 2013), 22, https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/docs/franklin/ FranklinProject_PlanofAction_final.pdf?_ga=2.126953165.1367691772.1557431082-188378903.1557431082.

fulfilling a legal requirement. Some concerns exist, however, that allowing individuals to opt in to the service registration system during selective service registration may lead to confusion on the purpose of the two systems, impact the solemnity of the selective service registration, or inadvertently lead individuals to perceive signing up for one system as tantamount to signing up for both—potentially impacting participation or compliance and carrying legal ramifications.

Individual and Organizational Participation

The success of a voluntary service registration system would require innovative approaches to entice individuals to register for the system, provide and update their information, and utilize the system to participate in service opportunities. Marketing efforts or awareness campaigns might be necessary to initially encourage individual users to participate in the system as well as continuously update their information, as stale data will be less useful to prospective service organizations and may result in limited participation by key organizations.

A meaningful and effective service registration system is also dependent upon participation of service organizations. In particular, the service registration system would need to complement—not compete with—current recruiting and hiring practices. Further, service organizations would need to actively specify and regularly update service opportunities, leveraging the system for unique recruitment opportunities. Some service organizations might not take full advantage of the system, using it simply as a vehicle for providing generic information to participants—potentially degrading its value and limiting the return on investment for federal funding.

Operational Considerations

The costs of a service registration system are unknown at this time; however, establishing a service registration system will include both upfront administrative, technical, and personnel costs, as well as continued annual costs to maintain a robust and well-functioning registration system. If SSS continues to exist and its role is expanded to integrate with a service registration system, it may also require additional funding beyond its fiscal year 2019 budget of $26 million.

In addition to cost, the question of which organization or agency would serve as host for a service registration system remains open. Granting a specific service organization, such as the Department of Defense or Corporation for National and Community Service, ownership of such a system may reduce buy-in from other entities and undercut its cross-service promotional intent. Service organizations are also likely to be reticent to use their own funding to implement a system that benefits other organizations and prefer any additional funding that might be dedicated to the service registration system instead be directed to them for their own designated use. Alternatively, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), General Services Administration, or the Selective Service System might be suited to hosting such a system if staffed and appropriated funds to do so. However, some skeptics may question whether the federal government is best-suited to operating and maintaining a user-friendly public-facing service registration system.

Data Security & Privacy

Several recent and high-profile data breaches have elevated the issue of data security and individual privacy to the forefront of the public debate. For many, the development of an extensive database of personal information and sharing of that information with non-federal organizations, raises data security and individual privacy concerns.

Opponents may contend that the 2015 OPM data breach supports concerns over the government's ability to safely manage and store the sensitive data of American citizens. Some opponents also could argue that the level of authorized third-party access needed to create a robust and interactive system—with authorized access for various agencies across state, local, and tribal governments as well as certified nonprofits—increases the likelihood that user data will become compromised.

Supporters of a service registration system will likely emphasize that many government agencies, such as the Social Security Administration, already host databases which safely store and protect the data of millions of Americans. While supporters acknowledge the inherent risk of such a database, they assert that risk could be limited by encrypting the data, managing access, and maintaining compliance.[7]

The June public hearings of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service are intended to generate discussion of issues surrounding national service in America. Feedback can be shared at www.inspire2serve.gov/content/share-your-thoughts.

---

[7] Symantec, *Internet Security Threat Report,* February 2019, 19, https://img03.en25.com/Web/Symantec/%7b984e78e2-c9e5-43b8-a6ee-417a08608b60%7d_ISTR_24_2019_April_en.pdf?aid=elq_19296&elqTrackId=b9249cc10ec0423b9b3da209ae6d57f7&elq=aa6a9f5b07fe49d3ae4522b1b4bed342&elqaid=19296&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=; and, Gemalto, *Data Breach Discoveries from the Breach Level Index: Data Privacy And New Regulations Take Center Stage*, 2018, 14-5.