

**Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service**

**Creating an Expectation of Service Hearing: An Infrastructure to Serve America**

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**I) Introduction**

I am honored to testify before the Commission on methods of deepening and spreading the experience and culture of service to our nation and to humanity.

In addition to commenting on the concept of a Voluntary National Service Registration System, I will speak on expanding, improving, and innovating our national service programs, with special emphasis on making service year opportunities and education awards more available to low-income populations who have a deep desire to serve, repair, and free their own hard-pressed communities from the poverty, violence, and hardship from which they suffer.

I have worked in the non-profit, community development, national service, education, job training, and leadership development fields all my adult life. The culture of service began for me as a child watching my mother volunteer full-time for the League of Women Voters, and as a Brownie and Girl Scout from age 7 to 17 steadily taking the pledge: "On my honor I pledge to do my duty to God and my country, and to help other people at all times."

I continued as an undergraduate at Harvard College through Phillips Brooks House as a volunteer in a Cambridge settlement house and then on the Ute Indian Reservation as a teacher for a summer preschool. In 1964 I joined the Civil Rights Movement through the Harlem Action Group and volunteered to create a summer pre-school program for 60 children who had missed kindergarten and needed preparation before starting 1<sup>st</sup> grade. We recruited volunteer teachers, raised funds to hire local teenagers as assistant teachers, obtained free space in a local public school, recruited the children through door-to-door invitations, and then walked the children from their homes each morning to school for a marvelous summer program.

In 1978, after serving for some years as a public school teacher, a Head Start Director, and the director of a parent-controlled independent public elementary school (an early pre-cursor of what evolved into non-profit publicly-funded community-based charter schools), I organized the Youth Action Program in East Harlem for teenagers to create community improvement projects of their own design. I volunteered as the lead organizer until I was able to obtain federal funds through the Community Anti-Crime Program of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration; then I hired 7 additional organizers, one for each project produced on each block in collaboration with the teenagers. This legislation was written by Congressman John Conyers reflecting the insight that crime prevention required community engagement.

The original YouthBuild program was one of those community improvement projects imagined by teenagers in 1978. They said, "Let's hire those unemployed young men who are selling drugs on the corner; let's have them rebuild those dilapidated abandoned buildings messing up our block; and let's create homes for the homeless people sleeping on our streets." It solved three major problems all at once. When that project was totally successful, it became my job to spread it throughout the United States because it so clearly met the needs and desires of young adults to simultaneously address education, employment, housing, crime, and leadership development in their communities, while rebuilding their own lives.

In 1993 we succeeded in getting YouthBuild authorized in federal law through the leadership of Senator John Kerry and Congressman Major Owens and the support of HUD under President George H.W. Bush. Since then, as a result of continuous bi-partisan support, over 180,000 low-income young adults who had left high school without a diploma have produced over 35,000 units of affordable housing for their neighbors in over 250 urban, rural, and tribal communities in America, while working toward their own high school equivalency diplomas and earning a scholarship for college. Since 2007 YouthBuild has spread to 21 other countries with strikingly similar needs and large populations of unemployed young adults yearning for meaning in life.

I was able to create YouthBuild because I am your classic privileged, white, upper-middle class, educated service-giver and non-profit leader who could afford to volunteer as a young college graduate in service to America. I was fortunate during the Civil Rights Movement to find a pathway to serve within low-income communities, accountable to the residents in those communities who comprised the boards of directors of the non-profit organizations where I worked. Eventually I was able to use my skills to raise money for those organizations to hire local residents to be paid for the service they craved to do but couldn't afford to do unless they earned a decent living to care for their families.

It is this powerful force for good, the infinite energy awaiting liberation within low-income communities, that I pray your Commission will understand is a precious, invaluable resource lying dormant, awaiting the attention, understanding, and resources to break through in a

beautiful and powerful array of service initiatives fueled by love, past pain, intelligence, and a deeply held vision for a caring, fair, opportunity-rich, beloved community.

We need a dramatic expansion of national service opportunities funded and valued by the government, designed for low-income service-givers to fulfill their highest potential and achieve their noblest aspirations.

**II) A Voluntary National Service Registration System:**

I do not have a strong opinion on whether or not a voluntary Registration system in which all are encouraged to sign up even if they are not currently seeking an opportunity would be beneficial and worth the investment. However, I lean toward the position that if the expected benefit is to create a national expectation of service, or a national culture of service, plus a link between the concepts of military service and of national and public service, there may be better ways to do that through on-going recruitment and communication strategies. A full cost analysis of the various possible approaches would be needed. Without a very compelling case for the Registration system, I tend to favor using available resources to expand actual opportunities.

I do have opinions on the benefits and modifications needed to existing and future on-line systems of communication regarding service, as outlined below:

**A) Basic Need for a Coordinated Information System**

There is definitely a national need for an easy-to-access central system of information for service opportunities that includes all the different categories and allows all Americans to understand what is available and then to search by location, activity, requirements, benefits, and organization. It should allow them to apply as soon as they choose.

I am not convinced that there needs to be a multi-million dollar creation of one totally new system that replaces the existing systems. Right now there are many reasonably well-developed sub-systems that may simply need to be linked within an over-arching site that communicates a unified and broad message about service, edited to ensure that they speak to all audiences. There also needs to be an actual expansion of service opportunities to embrace all aspiring volunteers.

In preparing this testimony I spent some time on line testing various searches for service opportunities. It is easy to find out how to register for military service ([USA.gov/selective](http://USA.gov/selective) service), and how to join the military ([www.USA.gov/join-military](http://www.USA.gov/join-military)). There is also a centralized system run by CNCS for national service including AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, NCCER, and other

resources that is quite accessible ([www.nationalservice.gov/serve](http://www.nationalservice.gov/serve)). There is a non-profit site run by Service Year Alliance that has laid the groundwork for certifying and assembling service year experiences across the country that are not necessarily AmeriCorps but are run by national or local non-profits (<https://serviceyear.org>). There is also an over-arching government website [www.usa.gov/volunteer](http://www.usa.gov/volunteer) that includes CNCS, Peace Corps, USA.gov/join-military, and others, but it is not complete.

I believe a few weeks of deep study by website and national service experts would find the best existing sites, and figure out how to link them in one master site with a unifying name and philosophy. It could then be relatively inexpensive to manage on-going communication and coordination with and about those sites.

However, while the existing sites are an excellent start, there are also clear gaps. There are audiences that are not being taken into consideration, or actively welcomed into the service opportunities. Whether or not the Commission decides to launch a Registration system, these gaps would need to be addressed in a unifying recruitment website.

#### B) Intentionally Welcoming All Constituencies

The missing pieces that emerge in on-line searches illustrate both the missing concepts and the missing opportunities in our national service system. It is extremely important that the Commission find ways to fill those gaps. Then the search, through whatever website(s), would enable all Americans to find opportunities appropriate for themselves. Some of these gaps are in communication, flowing from lack of awareness of different needs and perspectives, resulting in existing opportunities not being appropriately highlighted; and some of the gaps are in reality... that is, the opportunities have not yet been created.

For example: when I googled “service opportunities for people without a high school diploma,” virtually nothing came up. A variety of jobs appeared, but nothing related to service. Yet there are service programs like YouthBuild and Service and Conservation Corps that welcome individuals without a high school diploma, and deliberately help them achieve their high school equivalency or diploma during their service. These programs are ideal points of reconnection for young people who have lost their way but have talents to offer. Whoever develops the website system needs to think about all the populations who might be seeking service opportunities and make sure they feel welcome and their questions are answered.

A very positive result was that the CNCS website made it fairly easy to find information about opportunities for people with disabilities, and was explicit that service programs were seeking folks with disabilities, and that serving would not jeopardize SSD or SSI benefits.

In another example, when I googled, “How much could I earn in a service year?” I couldn’t find the monetary value of what was referenced on the AmeriCorps site as a “modest living allowance.” The value of the Segal Education Award was much easier to find. For low-income service searchers, the question of how much they will earn is critical and should be easier to find. Further, when I looked at the definition of a “service year” on one site, it named “a year before, during, or after college.” Given the large number of Americans who do not expect to attend college, at least not before they discover they can earn a Segal Education Award through AmeriCorps service, the definition needs to be more welcoming and inclusive.

There was a time when young adults without a high school diploma were welcome in the military. The military offered a pathway into a profoundly respected role in society, plus a full college scholarship and access to housing and health care. Now there are distinct limitations on the number of recruits that will be accepted if they have left high school without a diploma, even if they have earned a GED. There was also a time when up to 300,000 unemployed young men a year were welcomed into the federal Civilian Conservation Corps in a paid residential program to build and protect our public lands. Now, although local and state Service and Conservation Corps have partly filled the gap, the numbers are radically lower. These are profound losses for low-income young adults who seek access to education, employment, and service opportunities. The actual opportunities need to be multiplied.

To explore accessibility for another constituency, I searched the CNCS website regarding eligibility for AmeriCorps or VISTA positions for someone with a criminal record. There was no clarity. At one level it said you must “pass a national service criminal history check.” When I followed the prompts more deeply it called for a “criminal history statement (complete history). A list of every conviction you have ever received is required. It is to your advantage to be completely honest. Don’t feel that this will automatically disqualify you.” There was no further information. I submitted a question via email, and hadn’t received a response within three days.

In recent research, done by CIRCLE at Tufts in collaboration with Opportunity Youth United at Tides Center, we found that the majority of low-income young adults believed that if they had been convicted of a misdemeanor they were not eligible to vote. To counteract the stigma of past convictions and the expectation of continued punishment, in YouthBuild we have found it useful to put prominently on recruitment fliers a message like this: “YouthBuild is a fresh start. Mistakes made in your past will not be held against you. You are welcome whether or not you have a criminal record.” It helps to make it clear up front, to send the opposite message of what the young people have learned to expect and to fear. The pattern of mass incarceration since the early eighties has spread the stigma and insecurity far and wide.

Society must offer alternative pathways into respected contributing adulthood when the existing tracks do not suffice or when individuals have made mistakes in their past, often due to circumstances beyond their control in their childhood and youth. Well-run service programs are an outstanding, proven route.

When I consulted with young adult leaders who had come through programs designed for low-income young people about whether a unified voluntary registry would help, they expressed strong skepticism that this would help the important non-profit service organizations anywhere near as much as increased investment in expanding their programs to meet the demand that already exists from young people eager to serve their communities.

Another major concern is that it is unclear how widely known are the harsh penalties for men not registering with selective service. The inability to get college loans or public sector federal jobs if an individual somehow misses the information that he is required to register is a profound loss. There was no indication that the penalty of \$250,000 fees was actively pursued, but these other penalties seemed automatic. I was unable to find out what percentage of young men fail to register or what circumstances make individuals “exempt.” I recommend tracking down that information. Closing this gap would be a high priority, through wide communication in high schools, after school programs, job training programs, jails and prisons, and public media.

### **Expansion of National Service Opportunities for Low-income Service Givers**

My strongest recommendation to the Commission is that you prioritize persuading our nation to invest in expanding well-designed service opportunities for low-income young adults.

Meaningful and decently paid service experiences enable them to find their purpose in life, to build their skills, to reconnect to education, employment, and community leadership for lasting impact. They possess the deepest passion for solving some of the most difficult social problems in America. They possess a pool of knowledge and compassion that has been ignored. They yearn for meaning, for skills, for purpose. They do not have the resources embedded in their families to translate their motivation to action. We are wasting this resource. Paid service opportunities attached to training, education, and college scholarships are the proven solution waiting to be multiplied dramatically. Let us aim to expand to what I call “full scale”, which means reaching either the limit of the social need, the demand from participants, or the capacity to deliver well-run programs. We are nowhere near any of those limits.

In this context, I am inserting a quote from the Recommendations previously submitted to the Commission by young leaders in Opportunity Youth United:

“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 already applied to bring this comprehensive 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.”

This could be exactly the right moment to multiply all the service corps and programs engaged in environmental conservation, reclamation, restoration, mitigation, preservation, and alternative energy generation and green building. The government could issue a clarion call to Americans to join in helping to heal the earth, reverse the damaging pollution of air, water, and soil, and build a mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world, exemplifying in our nation the best practices so far invented.

### **Improving National Service Opportunities for Low-income Service Givers**

In addition to expansion of opportunities for lower-income service givers, there are some improvements in those same programs that I would recommend prioritizing:

- 1) Provide stronger supports and intentional transition to post-secondary education and employment;
- 2) Increase the living allowance for low-income members, perhaps creating a sliding scale for individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds;
- 3) Eliminate the taxes on the Segal Education Award;
- 4) Increase the flexibility of service length for low-income members: allow members to leave early to take a job and still get their Ed Award pro-rated based on time served. Some people simply can't afford to risk any gap in employment and must accept a job if one is offered prior to the end of their service period.
- 5) Create greater flexibility for rural and tribal communities to use in-kind human resources as match for AmeriCorps grants rather than requiring cash match that is often unavailable.

These are all consistent with the recommendations submitted by Opportunity Youth United, and more details on each of the above can be found in their submission at [https://inspire2serve.gov/\\_api/files/247](https://inspire2serve.gov/_api/files/247).

### **New Service Programs Designed for Low-income Communities and Individuals:**

I am moved to take this opportunity to recommend the creation of two new forms of National Service programs that, to my knowledge, currently have no appropriate public funding streams:

#### A) Community Improvement Projects Designed by Local Residents

There were two questions I asked local teenagers in 1978 which led to seven unique, tangible, substantial community improvement projects, one of which was later spread around the country as YouthBuild. It could now be the time to spread this basic process of organizing. Here are the questions:

“What do you love about your community? ..... And if you had the power, if you had the resources and the adult support...if we could get that for you....what would you change or create in your community to make it better?”

On every block they came up with great ideas, and we implemented seven of them, because we had seven full-time paid community organizers and we had CETA funds from which we could pay the teenagers for their after-school time spent producing community improvement projects of their own design. In addition to YouthBuild we created a public Leadership High School, Homes Away From Home for single young mothers and their children, anti-crime youth patrols in the public housing projects, and a Youth Congress that created and promoted a Youth Agenda for the Eighties. The Youth Congress went on to persuade the City Council to fund some of their ideas.

Local leaders of Opportunity Youth United are again asking these questions in the creation of local Community Action Teams. These questions are the opposite of what low-income young people expect. They do not expect to be offered power, support, or respect for their intelligence and their creative ideas. When influential and trusted adults invite them to imagine having the power, support, and respect that they have typically not had, their minds fly to creative solutions that are big, meaningful, and worthwhile. When there is an organization with the resources to staff the implementation of their ideas, and to hire the young people to participate, the results are profoundly positive.

A new funding stream should be authorized for CNCS, designed to unleash the positive energy of youth and young adults in communities across the country. Funds should be available to local community-based non-profit organizations like Teen Empowerment in Boston, or the

Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCDD) in Los Angeles, or SOAR in Sacramento, or hundreds of others who could compete for local community-improvement grants. The delivery system could be built into, or comparable to, the current national direct and state-based AmeriCorps system. That is, a local CBO could apply to the State Commission for funding to organize new community improvement projects, or a national non-profit intermediary with a multi-state delivery system could apply to manage the creation and the technical assistance and training for local CBO's eager to work with local residents to create community improvement projects of their own design.

There is a team of national non-profit leaders who would be happy to collaborate in drafting such legislation.

#### B) Fellowships for Social Entrepreneurs Rising in Low Income Communities

The idea of significant community improvement projects of their own design as described above requires for each project a full-time adult organizer to work with teen-agers and young adults who are paid for their participation. That would be one funding stream.

The additional concept of a Fellowship for Rising Social Entrepreneurs has emerged from watching impressive graduates of YouthBuild, Public Allies, Service and Conservation Corps, and the National Guard Challenge programs emerge in their communities as respected young leaders in their late twenties and thirties. Having lived through poverty often accompanied by violence in their childhood and teenaged years, they nonetheless have found a path forward and landed on reasonably solid footing, often with college degrees, sometimes married with a home and children. The financial struggles are still large and family pressures enormous, but they are essentially stable and ambitious to make a difference. They have been made even stronger by overcoming the odds. They have been motivated in part by their successful national and sometimes military service experiences.

Many of them have great ideas for organizing community improvement projects themselves, and are even starting their own non-profits. But the barriers and the challenges are enormous. They are not part of privileged, educated, upper-middle-class families with resources sufficient to allow them to volunteer for a year or two while they create something new and build their organization's reputation. They have not had the start-up boost that allows them to later be funded by Echoing Green, New Profit, Skoll Foundation, Ashoka Fellows or other supporters of social entrepreneurs. The essential start-up boost could come from a National Service Fellowship designed for young adults with the "lived experience of poverty," who have built strong positive reputations in leadership roles, have big ideas they want to implement, and have shown themselves worthy of investment.

#### **Building the Culture of Service in America**

The service experience and culture should be promoted early in schools, clubs, faith-based organizations, after school programs, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4 H Clubs and others. All forms of service options for all ages should be developed and publicized widely in social and public media.

We should definitely unify the concept of service to our nation and our world to include military, national, community, and public service, just as this Commission is charged with doing. There is a pressing need to counteract the destructive emphasis in our culture on competition, value in victory only, and profit above virtue. We should promote the culture of service through an ambitious and steady communication strategy of sharing inspiring stories, giving frequent public awards through many channels, uplifting good news, touting results, and magnifying the joy and deep spiritual satisfaction of doing good. The value of service should also be promoted in the corporate sector, as Fortune Magazine has just done in its annual description of 50 outstanding global leaders.

Thank you to all the Commissioners for your service to America and to humanity. I am honored to join you in seeking to unite our nation in love and service, with responsibility, community, and opportunity for all.