

Statement to the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

The Selective Service System Extended Community Makes a National and Local Difference

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The Selective Service System (SSS) registration requirement has been in place in its current form for almost four decades. As they turn 18, virtually all men in the United States are required to register with SSS. The latest registration statistics (Calendar Year 2016) reveal a 92 percent national registration rate for men ages 18 through 25. A high registration rate, being at or near 100 percent, is desirable for everyone. It helps ensure that our nation's young men have access to SSS registration-linked federal benefits such as student aid, training programs, and employment with the United States government. Moreover, a high registration rate maintains the fairness and equity of SSS in carrying out its core missions, which support national defense in the event of an emergency requiring conscription.

Despite a 92 percent overall national registration rate, some states, territories, and the District of Columbia (DC) have much lower registration rates. SSS' extended community of part-time employees – state directors and reserve force officers (RFOs) – as well as local volunteers – district appeal and local board members, registrars, and state resource volunteers (SRVs) – can take steps to improve registration rates at the state and local level.

Current and New Registration Approaches

Current registration awareness efforts may already be well known to the SSS extended community. SRVs may already check local post offices for registration and awareness materials. State directors and RFOs may already inform local officials about the High School Registrar Program. Additionally, the SSS extended community may have already worked towards the introduction, passage, and implementation of driver's license legislation (DLL) and other legislation linking state and local benefits to SSS registration. As of 2017, 40 states, 4 territories, and DC have put in place DLL, according to SSS. These efforts certainly continue to make a difference, helping to raise awareness of SSS registration and making registration even easier.

The SSS extended community can take a new, more targeted approach to complement current efforts to increase registration rates. First, state directors can ensure that their area RFOs, board members, registrars, and SRVs are aware of the local registration rate. If it is lower than the national average, they could start a conversation to identify root causes. A good place to start is for state directors to work with their RFOs to ensure that they have relationships and communication channels in place with local

board members, registrars, and SRVs. Building from this, the extended community could go over some important initial questions. For instance, they could ask why the local registration rate is lower than the national rate. They can also ask if SSS can provide further information broken out by county, city, or zip code to identify registration rate challenges at an even more local level. They can ask for history from SSS about previous efforts in a particular community.

Second, once the SSS extended community has an understanding of what the core issues are, they can look for solutions. They can start by identifying which registration improvement efforts are already underway and which are not, and evaluate the effectiveness of current efforts. For example, even with the implementation of optional DLL, where men can choose to register with SSS when obtaining their driver's licenses and identification cards, SSS registration rates may remain stubbornly low. In that case it may be worth exploring the need for automatic DLL – which has been a proven way to increase SSS registration rates – with state and region SSS leaders.

As another example, if local registration rate data shows that a city is falling behind the rest of the state in its registration rates despite the implementation of automatic DLL, it could mean that an even more targeted approach is necessary. Local men may not be interacting with their state's department of motor vehicles (DMV) to obtain a driver's license or identification card. It is possible that these men have alternative methods of obtaining an identification card or may not have an immediate need for a driver's license due to financial considerations or the presence of other transportation options. A next step could be for the SSS extended community to engage with local school districts since they may have the most opportunities to remind young men of the registration requirement while these men are in high school. School districts could then send district-wide reminders about SSS registration, embed registration opportunities into graduation or high school exit checklists, and advocate for the implementation of the SSS High School Registrar Program at each high school.

Third, many members of the SSS extended community may also be civic and community leaders. They may want to consider leveraging their local affiliations to raise awareness of local registration rate issues. One approach that may work well is having the state director or an RFO provide a briefing about the SSS registration requirement to a local civic board. This would be a good venue to discuss the local registration rate and ways to improve it. A successful briefing could also generate further interest in SSS volunteer opportunities. These new advocates, in turn, can help carry the SSS message back to their communities. Additionally, civic and community organizations may be interested in taking on an additional cause to help their community and be willing to post information on their websites, issue press releases, or even pass and adopt resolutions that may create local awareness of SSS registration where it may not have existed before.

An Example from the District of Columbia

The approaches discussed above have relevance for the SSS extended community in the District of Columbia. My experience is just one example of how they can be applied. As context, I served as SSS Chief of Staff from 2012-2015, and became aware that DC had recently implemented optional DLL to address its registration challenges. Unfortunately, the legislation did not dramatically improve the situation, and DC continued to have among the nation's lowest registration rates. In 2016, there was only a 48 percent registration rate in the District of Columbia for 18 to 25-year-old men compared to the 92 percent national registration rate.

As a concerned DC resident, I wanted to become involved in helping raise the registration rate. I reached out to the SSS Region I Director to become an SRV. Desiring to make the most of my volunteer role, I met the SSS DC State Director and we began to share ideas about how to improve the SSS registration rate. In my opinion, high schools are particularly important in raising SSS awareness since many men are seniors in high school when they are first able to register. I engaged leaders and staff of the DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education, DC Public Schools (DCPS), and the DC Public Charter School Board, along with public and private high schools, to inform them about the issue and see if and how they might be able to help. I learned that they were often willing to distribute messages to counselors and teachers about the SSS registration requirement, encouraging them to help remind their students to register. I was even invited to speak with all of DCPS' high school counselors at one of their district-wide professional development meetings. One of the counselors offered an idea that I continue to advocate for with DCPS; to include SSS registration information on high school graduation checklists.

I was also able to leverage my role as a volunteer mayoral appointee on the DC Mayor's Advisory Board on Veterans Affairs to raise greater awareness about DC's low SSS registration rate. Although this board focuses primarily on veterans' issues, the board maintains an ongoing interest in SSS registration since it is composed of veterans who are very supportive of national defense efforts. Since joining the board in early 2017, I championed SSS registration awareness in DC and leveraged my experience with SSS to build an updated vision for addressing the low registration rate. To add a quantitative basis to this, I worked with SSS Region I to obtain information about the estimated economic impact – the benefits that were lost – related to men's failure to register in DC. That was particularly helpful in raising awareness about the registration rate issue with DC councilmembers and staff and other senior government leaders. In addition to this, I began to work with the DMV about potentially including SSS awareness materials in its customer service offices around the District, to help men know more about SSS and their ability to register when they are applying for their driver's licenses and identification cards. I continue to look for ways to work with the DC government to improve the SSS registration rate.

Building from a previous Mayor's Advisory Board on Veterans Affairs resolution focused on transitioning DC from optional to automatic DLL, I developed a new resolution –

adopted by the board in late 2017 – strongly suggesting that the District take a more targeted approach to improve its registration rate and protect men’s access to registration-linked federal benefits. It contains recommendations for the DC government to: (1) appoint a government leader who would help young men register, (2) provide resources to support that leader, (3) require annual reports about DC agencies’ progress in improving the registration rate, (4) link SSS registration to a credential (the DC One Card) that is issued to many men in DC; and (5) pursue automatic DLL.

I took another step and created a draft DC government bill, the *Protecting Federal Benefits Act of 2018*, that would put the recommendations from the board’s resolution into action. Although it has not yet been introduced in the DC Council, I testified about the need for it before the DC Council’s Committee on Government Operations in March 2018.

Conclusion

The SSS extended community can use current and new, more targeted approaches to improve registration rates in communities around the United States. The extended community has an important role in helping young men know about the SSS registration requirement. It reminds men to register, thereby helping to protect men’s access to valuable federal benefits. Additionally, the SSS extended community supports national defense by continually helping make SSS’ emergency response capabilities even more fair and equitable. This extended community is critical, and they will often need to rely on the support and expertise of the full-time SSS staff. Together, with them, they can make a national and local difference.

Mr. Spangenberg wrote this article in his personal capacity. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of the District of Columbia or the United States Government.