

**Statement for the Record  
to the  
National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service  
by  
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## **Introduction**

I submit this statement for the record of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service (“the Commission”) in response to the invitation from the Commission for public comments on any aspects of the Commission’s mandate.

I concentrate my statement on findings and considerations pertaining to expanding pathways to national service in the Commission’s *Interim Report*<sup>1</sup> and on policy options for improving current national service policies and processes and creating more national service opportunities presented to the Commission in the *Staff Memorandum: National Service*<sup>2</sup>.

Professional experiences that inform my statement include founder and current chief executive officer of Peace Through Action USA, a national-scope, social capital-building organization that aspires to deploy national service participants and regular volunteers for domestic peacebuilding activities; past project director of AmeriCorps National and AmeriCorps VISTA projects for the American Legion Auxiliary; and 30 years’ experience in the nonprofit sector including in volunteer administration. The recommendations I offer are my own and do not represent the positions of organizations with which I am currently or previously affiliated.

I request the Commission to address my following recommendations in its final report to Congress:

1. Compensate national service participants at a level equal to those of entry- or higher-level active duty military servicemembers and/or federal civilian employees.
2. Harmonize policies and processes of national service programs.
3. Add civil and social connectedness as a focus area for national service.
4. Ensure that organizations accepting national service fellows in any such program to emerge receive funding to support fellows and comply with program requirements.

## **Establish Compensation Equality for National Service Participants**

I appreciate that the Commission is considering making recommendations to Congress in the area of compensation of national service participants. As the Commission learned in its first year, low allowance amounts pose a participation barrier to national service<sup>3</sup>. I can attest to this finding from my vantage as a past project director for AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA projects.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.inspire2serve.gov/reports/interim>

<sup>2</sup> <https://inspire2serve.gov/api/files/163>

<sup>3</sup> Quote from the Commission’s Interim Report: “We also engaged with some Americans who know about and want to volunteer for national service but are unable to participate because they cannot afford to do so. For example, while AmeriCorps provides financial support to its members, the living stipend is typically near the poverty line and cannot reliably cover necessities for some participants.<sup>23</sup> As a result, many interested Americans opt for alternative opportunities in the private sector.”

The low living allowances levels Congress sets in AmeriCorps programs presented a barrier to recruitment and a hardship for people who chose national service through the projects I led. At the recruitment phase, some people interested in our AmeriCorps service assignments quickly declined to pursue the opportunity once we informed them of their expected living allowance amount. Others accepted invitations to serve but then withdrew before their service start dates due to inability to secure housing that would be affordable to them at their expected living allowance amount. Still others chose to serve and left their assignments prematurely because the economic hardship they were incurring became too great or the attraction of a higher paying employment position proved too compelling. Many participants did complete their terms, but with prior savings drained and no savings accrued. Many others completed their terms, only with financial assistance of family members, sharing housing, and applying other personal money management techniques. I hypothesize that it was the rare AmeriCorps member who completed their service term with complete financial ease.

It is important to consider pay matters not only with qualitative information such as testimonials from AmeriCorps members and observations from AmeriCorps project directors, but also with consideration of quantitative information about costs of living in the United States. For this, I call to the Commission's attention the annual *Out of Reach* reports of the National Low Income Housing Coalition<sup>4</sup>. The coalition calculates a 2019 national average one-bedroom housing wage of \$18.65 per hour. This represents the hourly wage a full-time worker must earn to afford a modest rental home at HUD's fair market rent (FMR) without spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs.

In 2019, the Corporation for National and Community Service set the minimum living allowance amount for full-time AmeriCorps State and National members at \$13,992, or \$6.72 per hour over a 2,080 hour work year and the maximum living allowance amount at \$27,984, or \$13.45 per hour over a 2,080 hour work year<sup>5</sup>. Both "AmeriCorps hourly rates" fall below the national average one-bedroom housing wage cited above, and well-below the actual one-bedroom housing wage in many areas of the country.

An additional source of comparison for AmeriCorps living allowances is to regular military compensation. The 2019 AmeriCorps State and National minimal living allowance is 65 percent below and the maximum living allowance is 31 percent below the 2019 average regular military compensation of \$40,283 for active duty military servicemembers at the E-1 pay grade<sup>6</sup>.

If the intent of the Commission's interest in considering recommending adjustments to national service participant living allowances is to reduce money barriers to participation and/or reduce hardship of participants, then **the Commission must recommend in its final report that Congress increase AmeriCorps member living allowances to levels that will permit**

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<sup>4</sup> <https://reports.nlihc.org/oor/about>. "Out of Reach documents the significant gap between renters' wages and the cost of rental housing across the United States. The report's central statistic, the Housing Wage, is an estimate of the hourly wage a full-time worker must earn to afford a modest rental home at HUD's fair market rent (FMR) without spending more than 30% of his or her income on housing costs, the accepted standard of affordability. The FMR is an estimate of what a family moving today can expect to pay for a modestly priced rental home in a given area."

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[https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2019%20ASN%20NOFO\\_Clean\\_FINAL\\_508ed\\_o.pdf](https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2019%20ASN%20NOFO_Clean_FINAL_508ed_o.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33446>

**participants to meet the true cost of living successfully in the communities in which they serve.**

If the intent of the Commission's interest in recommending adjustments to national service participants is to establish parity in how the nation values and rewards military, national, and public service, then **the Commission must recommend in its final report that Congress place AmeriCorps member pay on the same schedules that it sets or authorizes the Executive branch to set for full-time active duty military servicemembers and/or full-time federal civilian employees.**

## **Harmonize national service programs policies and processes**

I note the Commission's interest in improving policies and processes of programs funded through the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Peace Corps, evident through policy options presented to it in the national service staff memorandum.

In addition to addressing the policy options presented, **the Commission could recommend in its final report that Congress amend the statutes that establish and the Executive branch amend policies that implement AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps VISTA, AmeriCorps NCCC, and Peace Corps to harmonize policies and processes between them.** Examples<sup>7</sup> include:

- Lift the cap on the amount of time AmeriCorps State and National members may engage in capacity-building activities (AmeriCorps VISTA members shall expend 100 percent of effort in capacity-building activities)
- Permit AmeriCorps State and National members to have post-service non-competitive eligibility for federal civilian service positions (a benefit currently granted to AmeriCorps VISTA members)
- Permit AmeriCorps VISTA members 55 years of age and older to transfer education awards to children and grandchildren (a benefit currently granted to AmeriCorps State and National members)
- Permit AmeriCorps State and National members to obtain an end-of-year stipend in lieu of an education award (a benefit currently granted to AmeriCorps VISTA members)
- Authorize relocation assistance for AmeriCorps State and National members (a benefit currently granted to AmeriCorps VISTA members)
- Establish common health care benefit, child care benefit, and life insurance benefit arrangements and processes across all AmeriCorps types
- Standardize prohibited activities across all AmeriCorps types
- Extend coverage under the Federal Employee Compensation Act to AmeriCorps State and National members (a coverage currently granted to AmeriCorps VISTA members).

## **Add Civil and Social Connectedness as a National Service Focus Area**

I am hopeful the Commission will use the opportunity of its final report to call attention to the wide chasm between national service opportunities and military and public service opportunities, *and* to propose solutions to close the gap, including significant increases in federal appropriations.

As the national service staff memorandum reports, only 80,000 to 85,000 Americans can perform national service annually through AmeriCorps or Peace Corps. These figures are miniscule against

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<sup>7</sup> This author does not have experience in administering AmeriCorps NCCC or Peace Corps. Commission staff, CNCS, and Peace Corps can likely identify additional opportunities for harmonizing policies and processes among federally-funded national service programs.

the roughly 1.2 million Americans privileged to serve our country through active duty military service and the 21 million public service employees. While it is not realistic to expect we could rapidly close the gap between national service positions and positions through the other service streams, clearly, we can and must do better.

I suggest to the Commission that **there is an additional national service gap meriting attention—a gap in national service foci**. Peace Corps has an international development focus. The Corporation for National and Community Service has (reasonably) interpreted national service statutes to establish its domestic national service foci on disaster relief, economic opportunity (including poverty alleviation), education, environmental stewardship, health, and military servicemember and veteran well-being.

I have no argument against these priorities. Yet, they do not represent the total scope of challenges facing our country. **The persistence of interpersonal and community aggression and violence is an additional area of community and national concern for which national service is well suited.**

We are a nation with too many hurting people. A quick glance at the television news or social media feeds provides ample evidence of distress, ranging from crude discourse about people and groups who differ from others in characteristics or beliefs, to microaggressions against particular communities, to bullying, to beatings. Then there is the litany of statistical information documenting the absence of peace for many Americans, including the 86 percent of Americans who report being victims of incivility,<sup>8</sup> the approximately 683,000 U.S. children who are substantiated victims of maltreatment,<sup>9</sup> the 20 percent of U.S. high school students who experience bullying,<sup>10</sup> the nearly four in 10 U.S. adults who do not feel safe walking alone at night within a mile of their homes,<sup>11</sup> the roughly 322,000 U.S. victims ages 12 or older of rape and sexual assault each year,<sup>12</sup> the family members of nearly 11,000 Americans who are killed by another with guns,<sup>13</sup> and the approximately 1,350 U.S. victims of hate crimes motivated by religious bias.<sup>14</sup> These are examples of the many forms of interpersonal and intergroup aggression and violence that Americans experience.

Aggression and violence inflict a heavy toll on their victims, persecutors, and society overall. People who experience aggression and violence may be battered physically and/or injured emotionally, socially, and/or spiritually, sometimes permanently. Those who commit aggression

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<sup>8</sup> Ray Williams. (2016). The rise of incivility and what to do about it. Psychology Today. Available from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201610/the-rise-incivility-and-what-do-about-it>.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2017). Child maltreatment 2015. Available from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cm2015.pdf#page=10>.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Kann, Tim McManus, William Harris, et al. Youth risk behavior surveillance — United States, 2015. MMWR 2016;65 (No. 6):1-174. Available from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/ss/ss6506a1.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Gallup News Service. (2014). Gallup poll social series: crime. final topline. Timberline: 937008, IS: 140, Princeton Job #: 14-10-012. Available from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/179558/not-feel-safe-walking-night-near-home.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2015). National crime victimization survey, 2010-2014.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Fatal injury reports, national and regional, 1999-2014". Accessed March 8, 2016, <http://i.usa.gov/1pLXBux>.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2016.) Uniform crime report, hate crimes statistics (2015). Available from [https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015/topic-pages/incidentsandoffenses\\_final](https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015/topic-pages/incidentsandoffenses_final).

and violence may ultimately suffer too, for example from internalized and/or externalized shame, separation from families and communities, and/or a criminal record. Members of communities who experience disproportionate amounts of aggression and violence are fearful. Anxiety among the general population is heightened. Our Republic is weakened.

There are great economic burdens that aggression and violence place on the nation, such as public costs associated with child and elder protection, victim services and survivor assistance, and justice administration; and loss of contributory actors in the economy. Experts estimate the economic cost of interpersonal violence in the United States to be 3.3 percent of gross domestic product,<sup>15</sup> which equated to a staggering \$612 billion in 2015.

The good news is that aggression and violence are preventable behaviors. And, there is a wide array of practical solutions that are available for people to resist aggression and violence and instead *cultivate civil and social connectedness*. Examples of practices that cultivate civil and social connectedness abound and include facilitated dialogues, civility cultivation processes, mediation, restorative justice processes<sup>16</sup>.

These practical solutions achieve their desired results only when people understand, choose, implement, and sustain them. **What I assert is missing most is not, then, the absence of peaceful practices from which to choose, but rather the dearth of people activated and equipped to put the practices into practice. This situation presents a terrific opportunity for national service!**

National service participants could be deployed for direct service activities such as training community members in social and emotional skills; convening and supporting restorative circles and mediation sessions in which community members resolve differences; and serving as neighborhood watch leaders, home visitors, youth courts leaders, community arts leaders, or sport for development leaders. Or they could be deployed for capacity-building activities such as conducting peaceful practices needs assessments and services gaps analyses; leading planning processes; developing and maintaining coalitions of organizations with common peacebuilding purposes; selecting and introducing culturally-appropriate, evidence-based and promising peaceful practices into the community; identifying trainers for teaching the practices; recruiting community members to learn the practices; and building the funding, promotion, and performance management infrastructures to sustain the practices.

Increasing civil and social connectedness is the additional cause that I wish to elevate as an appropriate focus of national service. I assume there are other challenges not currently favored in national service law and policy for which national service would be helpful. Accordingly, **the Commission should recommend in its final report that Congress amend the statutes and the Executive branch amend policies that establish and implement AmeriCorps to create space for national service projects with foci beyond those currently indicated in AmeriCorps statutes and implementing policies, including funding announcements.**

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<sup>15</sup> Waters, H. R., A. A. Hyder, Y. Rajkotia, S. Basu, and A. Butchart. (2005). The costs of interpersonal violence—An international review. *Health Policy* 73(3):303-315.

<sup>16</sup> See Peace Through Action USA's peaceful practices inventory for additional examples.

<https://peacethroughaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Programs-Information-Sheet-Peaceful-Practices-Inventory.pdf>

## **Provide Funds to Organizations Hosting National Service Fellows**

I am intrigued by the policy option proffered in the national service staff memorandum to authorize and fund a national service fellowship program that “empowers individuals to select their own service opportunity at a certified nonprofit of their choosing.” If designed well, a fellowship program could give national service aspirants great flexibility in how and with who they could go about pursuing and enhancing the common good and meeting the needs of communities and the country. It could stimulate social innovation, encourage entrepreneurship, and cultivate fresh nonprofit leadership. And, it could make national service participants available to small- and medium-size nonprofit organizations that lack capacity to apply for and manage, or do not have need for, teams of participants.

However, hosting even one national service fellow will impose human capital and project management responsibilities on host sites such as staff time to supervise fellows and completing performance reporting, as well as direct costs of implementing fellows’ service projects.

**The Commission should recommend in its final report that Congress, should it activate a national service fellowship program, ensure that supervision and support policies, processes, and funds are put in place so that host organizations can effectively utilize and support the fellow while assuring optimal use of public national service funds.** Alternately, Congress could designate a federal agency or allow for contracted intermediaries to assume fellow management and administration responsibilities.