

Statement of YouthBuild USA, Inc.

National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service National Service Hearings | March 04, 2019

Submitted by David Abromowitz, Chief Public Policy Officer

Chairman Joseph Heck and distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to present this written statement to you on behalf of YouthBuild USA and the tens of thousands of young adults who have participated in YouthBuild programs over the past 40 years. YouthBuild USA, Inc., is the national non-profit organization that supports a national network of over 250 local YouthBuild programs in 44 states, the District of Columbia, the US Virgin Islands and soon in Puerto Rico. Each YouthBuild program is locally sponsored and operated by a community based non-profit or governmental agency. In addition, through its YouthBuild International division this model has now spread to 23 other countries around the world. It is an honor to be able to participate in the work of the Commission by sharing insights learned through our work with low income young adults who find paths to leadership and service that stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Background on YouthBuild and its core commitment to service.

The mission of YouthBuild USA is to unleash the intelligence and positive energy of low-income young people to rebuild their communities and their lives. We seek to join with others to help build a movement toward a more just society in which respect, love, responsibility, and cooperation are the dominant unifying values, and sufficient opportunities are available for all people in all communities to fulfill their own potential and contribute to the well-being of others. This mission has been translated into the YouthBuild model, first developed 40 years ago, which has touched the lives of nearly 200,000 young men and women since that time.

In YouthBuild, low income young adults ages 16 to 24, who left high school without a diploma and who are not regularly in the workforce, enroll full time for a school year. They spend roughly half their time back in the classroom working hard to earn their high school diploma or equivalent, and spend the balance of time attaining job skills by building affordable housing for homeless and low-income people in their communities. Many also train for jobs in other growing sectors, such as healthcare, technology, and customer service.

A core element of the experience is the exposure of these young adults to opportunities to serve their communities in multiple ways. Indeed, the YouthBuild program is one of the few federally funded programs (along with Conservation Corps) that enables lower income youth to serve their own communities. This experience raises their self-esteem enormously, with many YouthBuild graduates reporting that the housing or other community asset they built was the first tangible accomplishment they could point to and be recognized for during their young lives. There is also an emphasis on leadership development, with each YouthBuild class of students having a student-led policy council and elected leaders.

For 40 years, local YouthBuild programs have enabled young people who faced innumerable barriers and failed systems growing up to rebuild their lives and their communities, and to realize their full potential. Our students are drawn from the nearly 4.6 million young adults in America ages 16-24 who are not in school or work, of which an

estimated 3 million have grown up in poverty in urban, rural and tribal communities. Like many in the youth development field, we call these young people “opportunity youth” (rather than “disconnected” or “at risk”) because we see daily their assets and potential.

YouthBuild USA is the national non-profit intermediary and support center that has developed the model, nurtures a national affiliated network among the roughly 250 locally sponsored programs operating in 44 states and US territories, provides technical assistance and training, and hosts national conferences for our young leaders and program directors.

Based on this work over decades, and with feedback from our local program directors who are closest to the young people in their communities, we have some insights that may benefit the Commission in creating a national service approach that opens doors to all who want to serve. It is critical to start with the understanding that for millions of opportunity youth, their day to day reality creates special challenges. Unlike youth who may have grown up in communities where service projects and opportunities were commonplace in school and organized settings, exposure to similar service options may simply have been non-existent. Even the term “community service” may come freighted with connotations of an alternative to involvement in the criminal justice system. Even for those opportunity youth who may have an interest in serving, economic pressures may require them to choose paid work over volunteering.

Our suggestions that follow reflect our experience that when opportunity youth are exposed to the chance to improve their own communities, in ways that respond to the issues they see around them daily, they come to internalize a lifelong ethic of service. We will address three essential questions that the Commission has been addressing.

Finally, we have attached an appendix with several stories of the transformative power of service in the lives of opportunity youth.

1. How can the United States can increase participation in military, national, and public service by opportunity youth who are gaining skills critical to address our national needs?

- Market and promote national service as a life changing opportunity that not only addresses critical community needs and problems but that is also a transformative experience that provides personal and professional skills and pathways to careers and education.
- Keep service accessible to all individuals regardless of age and socio-economic status.
 - Invest public resources that address barriers on housing, transportation, child-care and cost of living by increasing living stipends.
 - Invest public resources that increase equity, inclusion, and diversity across service programs through cultural competency training and robust community engagement and outreach.
- Continue to offer and expand national service education awards, public service loan forgiveness and GI Bill opportunities for those serving. It is an incredible incentive that has remained stagnant as education costs continue to rise substantially.

- Provide certifications and college credit during service to be used for post service opportunities.
- Create opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, professional networking, and service reflection that can contextualize the service experience and hands-on learning of members.
- Highlight the success stories of opportunity youth from across AmeriCorps and service programs, to the public at large and to the communities in which opportunity youth live. There are so many young people serving across our country and sharing their stories can help to increase awareness and understanding of service, and help other young people see service as a viable option/ opportunity. The stories in the Appendix help illustrate this.

2. What are the barriers to participation in military, national, or public service particular to opportunity youth?

In the context of opportunity youth, the numerous barriers to participation in National Service include some of the following:

- Not knowing much about National Service and AmeriCorps service opportunities to begin with. When asking new YouthBuild students if they ever heard about AmeriCorps, most individuals have no idea what AmeriCorps is, what it does and what is provided. It is only after some time has passed that students are able to articulate their contributions to their community and fully understand the impact of their service experience.
- If a young person does learn about AmeriCorps and what it does, when conducting a personal cost/benefit analysis with little information on what national service provides during and after service, most people will conclude that it is probably not worth it. If you are hoping to become a college graduate and concerned about incurring incredible debt, the education award can seem like just a drop in the bucket. If you are not certain how AmeriCorps will provide future opportunities and make you a marketable job candidate (which research shows it can and does), you'll say why do it. If you don't know of others who have served and benefitted then why would you take that risk?
- The cost of living continues to increase while resources remain stagnant or unaddressed.
 - Lack of housing for service members.
 - Lack of local national service position/opportunities. Many opportunities are limiting because it requires relocating, instead of being close to family and support.
 - Lack of accessible and affordable child care
 - Lack of transportation assistance
 - Lack of comprehensive health insurance for members. Currently there is a health benefit that does not meet ACA standards and a health reimbursement. While the health reimbursement will cover out of pocket expenses (co-pays, prescription) up to \$6,600, it does not cover the cost of the monthly deductible which can be very high.

3. What is the value and impact of service for opportunity youth?

- Service is transformative! Young people come to YouthBuild because they are in search of a positive change; they participate because they WANT their diploma and a good job. But what they NEED is so much more. In YouthBuild they are part of a mini- community of peers who have faced and may continue to face similar obstacles and traumas. They are surrounded by caring adults that support them, their families and the community. Some but not all, are introduced to an opportunity that they've never heard before called AmeriCorps. They become part of a national force, 80,000 a year strong! They are given the opportunity to be part of something bigger than themselves: An opportunity to learn, to serve, to lead and to be an active citizen in their community.
- For the millions of opportunity youth, who for a lack of a better term are disconnected from school, work and ultimately their community, the term "service" is sometimes understood negatively. It can be understood as a punishment handed out to them or to others around them involved in the criminal justice system. Something that is a requirement by a judge rather than as a choice.

When given the opportunity to be an AmeriCorps member in a supportive setting, their view of service and community is positively reframed. They quickly realize that service is powerful and transformational. They have a new sense of pride and purpose in their heart for helping others in need. When they wear that AmeriCorps "A" they are part of a life-long national movement. I have heard from members on more than one occasion that not only do they look at their community differently and more positively, because of their service, but that the community looks at them more positively for their contributions. It helps heal and connect.

Conclusion: We have seen thousands of times over that opportunity youth like those in YouthBuild come to love the service experience, and incorporate service into their lives and that of their children and friends. Data from studies supports this. Through service they find pride, gain meaningful skills, and achieve leadership. Finding their way to that first positive service experience however, is far harder than that of young people who grow up in more resource enriched communities. To make service truly universal, America needs to consider the special circumstances of opportunity youth and be willing to invest in opening doors to service to them as well.

Stories of the Transformative Power of Service

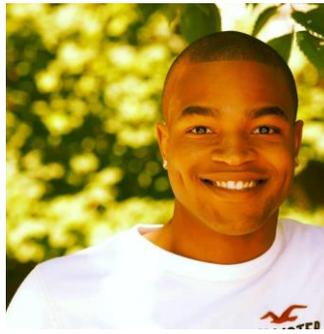
Xavier Jennings, Graduate of Mile High YouthBuild in Denver, Colorado. Video highlighting service: https://youtu.be/eMaTh_C3pZw

Elijah Stephenson, VISTA at YouthBuild Providence in Rhode Island. (Profile Attached)

Paola Flores, San Jose Conservation Corps, San Jose, California. Paola was recently recognized by The Corps Network as their 2019 Member of the Year:
<https://corpsnetwork.org/2019-corpsmember-of-the-year-paola-flores-san-jose-conservation-corps-charter-school/>

Steven Love II, YouthBuild VISTA Alumnus, at YouthBuild Venice, California (Profile Attached)

Elijah Stephenson



Elijah Stephenson served as a VISTA at YouthBuild Providence (YBP) in Rhode Island. As a former student and AmeriCorps member at the program, Elijah has the unique opportunity to serve an organization he is deeply connected to. His time at YouthBuild Providence has had a profound impact on him personally and professionally and when his year with AmeriCorps began to wrap up, the decision to move into a capacity building role was easy. “As a graduate of YouthBuild Providence, I have received opportunities and benefits that have built my character,” he says. “Serving has given me the opportunity to give back to a community that has done so much for me.” Elijah’s myriad of experiences at the program have helped build important capacity and resulted in tremendous professional and personal growth.

Previously as a full-time AmeriCorps member, Elijah served YBP students directly through tutoring, construction help and mentoring. Now as a VISTA, Elijah has the opportunity to step into new leadership roles and take on larger programmatic responsibilities including spearheading the organization of fundraisers, managing new and existing community partnerships and overseeing the program’s social media presence. He is also supporting the development of a mentoring program and working closely with staff to identify academic and career opportunities for students. He is building capacity and sustainability around partnerships, fundraising and academic support by streamlining processes, documenting his work and maintaining databases of contacts.

Elijah’s work is often demanding, pulling him in multiple directions at once while presenting competing deadlines. In times of stress or when he feels overwhelmed he has turned to his colleagues and mentors at the program for support, and with their guidance he worked diligently to find solutions to challenges and move the work forward. “One of the most important things I have learned is the value of patience,” he says, noting the vital role it played in building partnerships and managing a heavy workload. Rather than allowing a problem to grow Elijah has met each obstacle with innovation and commitment. “I am motivated by watching my supervisors and colleagues rise to the challenges before them,” he notes.

Elijah recently began taking classes in course management in preparation for his studies in Social Work. “I am motivated and I am inspired to go back to school because of the experiences I’ve had while at YouthBuild Providence,” he says. As he prepares for the transition from service to university he is excited to draw on the skills and lessons learned during his national service career to inform his work. “I never would have thought that indirect service would satisfy me because no one would know how hard I worked behind the scenes, but it has,” he says. He is excited to take the skills he has gained as a VISTA and the lessons he has learned through the relationship with YBP and apply them to his future career in Social Work.

Steven Love II

YouthBuild VISTA Alum- YouthBuild Venice

What were your main assignments?

I was responsible for building up YouthBuild Venice's alumni database and helping to improve alumni outreach. The database was used to track YouthBuild Venice alumni and help the program connect alumni with supportive services, such as job searches or accessing college. I also helped to develop an "Advisory Board", and as part of this project I did some asset mapping of community partners and resources. The idea of the advisory board was to get help and direction from local businesses and partners in terms of preparing YouthBuild students and alums for jobs or gaining job skills.



What did you enjoy most about your VISTA service?

I just wanted to give back to my community. It was also a chance to grow personally and professionally. It was a great experience working with my supervisors, Tim Sweeney & Rick Solis. Tim & Rick challenged me in new ways and held me accountable. And they did this through a consistent dialogue about what I could do better. They really pushed me to own my project, and it was tough at times, but I really grew because of it. I am happy to know the advisory board is still in place and benefitting students.

What are you doing now?

I'm in my second year of service with Public Allies working with CDTech in Los Angeles. I am working on community development for CDTech and I am also helping to create a leadership development curriculum for high school students for a program called YLEAD.

What inspired you to continue with national service?

I want to build my community and be a part of change. With VISTA, I was behind the scenes building capacity and with Public Allies I am now more engaged with the community. It is a chance to be a part of something bigger than myself.