

**Testimony before House Education and Labor Committee  
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities  
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**AmeriCorps Alums  
and  
Hands On Atlanta**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am here today as a proud veteran of AmeriCorps National Service and a current member of AmeriCorps Alums—the national network that aims to connect, support and mobilize alums to strengthen our communities and our nation. I am honored to be here as one of the 400,000 alums of AmeriCorps National Service.

I am here in part to report on the promising news of the growing AmeriCorps Alums network across the nation. I was in New Orleans just last month to take part in the third annual national leadership conference of AmeriCorps Alums where over a hundred leaders from the alumni network—each a brilliant example of a lifetime of service—came together to share strategies and resources on the development of alumni mobilizing for continued service on a local level. Each is leading the effort to keep alums engaged in their local communities. I met Michael Agyin from Los Angeles, an African American man who is hearing impaired. He is providing leadership for our entire network on inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities. I met Lisa Tatum from Dallas, who is leading that community's chapter and has self-organized and self-financed alums to travel to the gulf to serve the victims of Hurricane Katrina. And I met Traymone Deadwyler, who is sharing his skills as a professional with the Red Cross, training other Alums on how to respond to disasters.

At that conference I also had the profound opportunity to take part in a recovery service project with 250 alumni and current AmeriCorps members serving in the Gulf—lead by AmeriCorps Alums. Months after most of the nation's attention and volunteer energy has faded from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, AmeriCorps alumni as well as current members--most notably the NCCC-- remain in New Orleans providing the direct service and, importantly, the leadership necessary for others to contribute to the massive effort to rebuild those communities.

Secondly, I hope to share with you a vision for what could be possible if we are successful in transcending our current challenges in engaging alumni. That vision is actually within reach: as I will try to describe in my statement today, alumni are taking leadership by self-organizing to continue to serve. A modest but intentional focus of resources to support the systems for this action would promise tremendous return. We ought to leverage the significant investment we are making in service leaders through AmeriCorps by following it with a relatively modest investment in the lifetimes of service that AmeriCorps inspires.

Specifically, I want to suggest that the Committee include in the legislation funding for an AmeriCorps Alumni Reserve Corps which would create a national database of Alums and other skilled individuals who are ready and willing to be deployed to respond to national crises – both those that are sudden, like a hurricane or terrorist attack, and those that are longstanding and insidious, like our nation's challenge to end the education achievement attack or provide health care to low-income families. This reserve force would leverage the investment our nation has already made in AmeriCorps by tapping the talents of those who have served, giving these individuals the chance to continue their civic commitment.

**Background:**

Since the launch of AmeriCorps in 1994, some 400,000 Americans like me have completed a term of service and make up the body of AmeriCorps Alums. This is a powerful and growing potential resource for communities that has gone largely uncultivated and unsupported over the past decade.

In fact, a recent longitudinal study released by the Corporation for National and Community Service states that AmeriCorps alumni are more likely to volunteer in their communities, pursue public sector careers like teaching, and demonstrate more active civic engagement on a variety of levels than the average American. Without much intentional effort to support it, alums are taking the initiative to continue to help our own communities.

As a result of my service experience in AmeriCorps, I have sought out my own opportunities for continued service and civic leadership. I sit on the board of the Vine City neighborhood association; I am a member of the Annie E Casey Foundation Steering Committee on Student Success; and I remain actively involved in the school where I served my AmeriCorps year, helping coordinate corporate sponsorship for academic and after-school programs. I consider myself lucky to have had the access to the resources to learn how to navigate my communities' networks and find ways to get engaged.

AmeriCorps Alums are our communities' emerging citizen leaders—we are applying our skills in the workforce, taking advantage of college opportunities made possible by the Educational Award, and some are continuing to serve our communities in a variety of ways.

From my own program at Hands On Atlanta, I have teammates who are now in law school, training to be doctors, serving as teachers, and working in nonprofits like me. Regardless of our career or life path, we all share a common bond that is born out of the experience of service. It is an experience that has shifted our consciousness about community responsibility and embedded an ethic of service.

However this commitment sometimes lies dormant. The skills and experience of alums remains a relatively untapped resource when compared to the vast numbers of alums who are out there. The spirit that brought these alums to service must be better leveraged and their skills and experience put back to work. Alums answered the call to service once before, and they will again with a coherent framework that applies their leadership and teamwork skills, and reinvigorates the spirit of service that inspired them to make the choice to serve not so long ago.

AmeriCorps Alums, first established in 1997, made steps in coordinating a national network to support the continued leadership and service of its members. Yet the organization has been challenged to find tangible and valuable ways to engage alums effectively in real continued involvement and in ways that leverage their skills and experience in communities while supporting their ongoing leadership development.

AmeriCorps Alums, first established in 1997, made steps in coordinating a national network to support the continued leadership and service of its members. The organization intends to leverage the skills and experience of alums while supporting their ongoing leadership development. One piece of this strategy has been the creation of a vibrant online community that enables AmeriCorps alums to organize themselves and convene for continued service. The website [www.lifetimeofservice.org](http://www.lifetimeofservice.org) has over 100 chapter homepages that local alumni leaders have created to communicate to other alumni about further opportunities to engage in service. With modest additional resources, AmeriCorps Alums could turn this virtual and community-based resource into a powerful national tool to respond to our nation's greatest needs.

### **What AmeriCorps Alums Need:**

The post-service period for many is one of transition and change. They may be entering into a new career—focusing all of their energies on being successful in that new job; they may be going on to college where they need to attend to their studies to ensure success; they may be starting families; they may be

doing several of these things at once. Despite these other competing life priorities, many still are eager to find ways to remain connected to national service—their programs and teammates—and the communities where they served.

In my experience both as an Alum seeking to remain involved in my community and as a leader seeking to support current AmeriCorps members preparing for their lifetimes of service, I have identified a few things that are critical to success in that regard:

*Continuity from the AmeriCorps Service Term to a Lifetime of Service:* A powerful alumni network begins with a connection to that network as members. Many programs and state commissions do a tremendous job with limited or no resources in making this connection for their members. States and programs that commit to this type of activity are yielding the return on that investment. .

For example, in Georgia, our state service commission convenes all the members in the state to participate in two annual gatherings—a service kick-off and a graduation event to mark the closing of the service year. I routinely invite Hands On Atlanta’s AmeriCorps alumni to our community-wide service events like MLK Day. These are just a few of the touch points that we can make available to alums to stay involved, but we shouldn’t end there—more sophisticated resources for ongoing and sustainable service are also needed.

*Systems and Infrastructure for Engagement:* After a year of service, there is not always an obvious place to go to connect to other alumni in the local community. Only recently has the infrastructure for AmeriCorps Alums chapters begun to be cultivated. The good news for alumni of our program is that our host organization, Hands On Atlanta, provides exactly that type of community resource—a training ground for leaders to gain skills and knowledge about community issues; projects to take volunteer action to address community issues; and a gathering place to connect to others who are leading service activities in the community. This type of “service center” should be available in every community and AmeriCorps Alums should be an integral part.

*A Network to Continue their Development:* Once again, we are missing an opportunity if the investment that is made in AmeriCorps members is not leveraged beyond the AmeriCorps term. We should make a relatively modest investment in the ongoing maintenance and “continuing education for citizenship” that starts but shouldn’t end with the training that is provided in AmeriCorps. This can happen virtually and in the real world—leveraging the growing capabilities of the internet and the vast networks of expertise that exist within the national service community.

### **Ideas:**

If we are successful in building a network for national service alumni, we will find an invaluable and perpetually growing resource bank of human and leadership capital poised to answer the call to be mobilized for continued service in communities. Below are some specific ideas for how to make this happen that can capitalize on the specialized skills, talents, and experience of AmeriCorps Alums.

**An Alumni Reserve Corps:** Alumni of AmeriCorps represent a growing and capable resource that can meet the workload surge following a disaster and provide valuable and experienced service in targeted issues of local and national concern, such as failing schools, environmental projects, or special needs for out-of-school time. During their terms of service, their sponsoring organizations make significant investments in the training and preparedness of AmeriCorps members—specialized training such as American Red Cross Mass Care and Shelter Operations, Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), or reading tutor training that meets state teaching standards.

Alumni could be more easily engaged to respond to crises and other priority national needs if a database, training and deployment systems were developed and if funding were available for living and travel expenses for Alumni volunteers ready to be called back into service.

**Infrastructure for Service:** One of the key challenges facing the successful mobilization of alums in continued service after their program year is the local convening and activation infrastructure for alums to plug in to for ongoing service opportunities, leadership development, and a venue for connecting to other alumni leaders in their community. Service centers that provide project opportunities and ongoing training and leadership development are important community resources for alumni.

**Alums On Campus:** Many alums are taking advantage of college opportunity as a result of their education award benefit from AmeriCorps. At the same time many colleges and universities are offering a matching scholarship or other benefits. Indeed, AmeriCorps alumni are precisely the profile of candidate admissions officers are on the lookout for.

In exchange for a match of the Ed Award from their schools or another form of award augmentation, we can incent Alums to take on leadership of service activities on their college campuses. A special Ed Award supplement can be tied to continued community service activity, recruitment and promotion of national service on campus, and other community leadership roles that alums might take on.

**Civic Entrepreneur Fellowship:** AmeriCorps alumni represent some of the most innovative problem solvers this nation has to offer. Hundreds of social entrepreneurs have served through AmeriCorps and gone on to apply their skills to starting innovative new programs. The Civic Entrepreneur Fellowship would support this trend by providing 2-year fellowships and leadership training for alumni who want to develop new solutions to pressing community problems. .

Through these efforts, AmeriCorps Alumni can continue to be the vanguard for change in communities, large and small, across the nation.

AmeriCorps Alumni, individuals who have dedicated one year of service or more, can continue to be the vanguard for change in communities, large and small, across the nation.

This hearing happens on the eve of an important milestone for AmeriCorps—the enrollment of the 500,000<sup>th</sup> member, coming next month. In the next decade—sooner rather than later, I hope—when we are celebrating the one millionth AmeriCorps member milestone, I envision a network of alums that is continuing to lead the strengthening of communities through service and that leverages the skills, experience, and talents of the rich and diverse individuals that make up the network to build a stronger and more vibrant country. With a small but intentional focus of resources and the will and spirit of AmeriCorps Alums to serve, we can make that vision a reality.

## **APPENDIX: The National Service Reserve Corps**

Alumni of AmeriCorps and other national service programs represent a growing and capable resource that can meet the workload surge following a disaster and provide valuable and experienced service in targeted issues of local and national concern, such as failing schools, environmental projects, or special needs for out-of-school time. Alumni could be more easily engaged to respond to crises and other priority national needs if a database, training and deployment systems were developed and if funding were available for living and travel expenses for Alumni volunteers ready to be called back into service.

A Reserve Corps model could deploy AmeriCorps Alums in 30-day assignments. These assignments could be renewable twice for up to a 90-day total deployment. In support of these deployments a national training program to maintain readiness and any relevant certification of training. Alums could be available to deploy in disaster response or during needs for short-term service surges, for example support for summer service learning activities for at-risk youth or discrete environmental conservation projects.

We propose creating legislation that support:

- Authorizing establishment of a National Service Reserve Corps Partnership to establish necessary policies, rules, and procedures comprised of representatives from the Corporation for National and Community Service, state commissions, alumni groups, national service programs and advised by governmental and non-governmental disaster management and relief organizations. The Partnership will develop and communicate to alumni and national service programs the eligibility requirements, program expectations, enrollment procedures and other necessary Reserve Corps program information;
- Authorizing the development of systems needed to make Reserve Corps resources available to emergency managers at the local, state, and national level and other organizations approved for placement of reserve corps members including systems for training, typing, deployment and coordination;
- Establishing a program and policies for maintaining Reserve Corps members' training, certifications, and skills, and correspondent readiness and eligibility for deployment;
- Establishing a searchable database accessible to emergency managers at the local, state, and national levels and other organizations approved for placement of Reserve Corps members that contains regularly updated information necessary for effective deployment of Reserve Corps resources including: information describing availability, special skills, and certifications of each member and member contact information;
- Establishing a website, electronic mail, and other communications systems needed to ensure safe and efficient deployment of Reserve Corps resources;
- Developing agreements with disaster relief organizations, participating national service programs, and other organizations with whom Reserve Corps members would affiliate;
- Developing necessary training curriculum and delivery mechanisms including "just-in-time" training as appropriate; and
- Developing content and standards needed for inclusion of the Reserve Corps in national, state, and local disaster management plans.

National Service Reserve Corps will be authorized at such sums as may be necessary.