

**Testimony of Susan Stroud**  
**Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities**  
**House Committee on Education and Labor**  
**April 19, 2007**

**Introduction**

Good morning. Rep. McCarthy, Rep. Platts and members of the subcommittee -- I am Susan Stroud, founder and Executive Director of Innovations in Civic Participation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting national service both in the US and abroad. ICP incubates ideas that will help bring national and community service to scale in the US and other countries. Madame Chair, I request permission to submit written testimony.

I have spent the past twenty-five years setting up organizations and programs that engage large numbers of young people in service -- as the founding director of the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University and of Campus Compact, a national coalition of over 1,000 university and college presidents committed to civic engagement and service-learning. I was incredibly fortunate in 1993 to join the late Eli Segal and others at the White House Office of National Service and charged with creating the Corporation for National and Community Service and AmeriCorps. At the Corporation for National Service, I was the first director of Learn and Serve America.

I applaud the chair and the members of the subcommittee for putting “Renewing the Spirit of National and Community Service” so high on your agenda. The issue is critically important – for all Americans, but especially for young people, whose skills and habits as life-long active citizens are being formed.

### **Context for new ideas for service**

Before speaking about one specific proposal for Renewing the Spirit of National Service that ICP has developed -- Summer of Service -- I would like to provide some context for the value of scaling up the next generation of service programs:

1. First, there should be a continuum of service that begins in elementary school and continues through one’s work life and retirement. The commitment to serve one’s community is learned, not inherited. To be an effective citizen, one needs to *practice* being a citizen. It is not something one can learn entirely from a textbook. So people from all backgrounds, young and old, need opportunities to *practice* being active and engaged citizens.
2. Second, service is strategy to meet critical national needs. Service gets things done. Every policymaker should ask how service can address unmet needs and build it into a public policy strategy. Service isn’t nice, it’s necessary. We all benefit from full-time, stipended service, which improves

education, the environment, public safety and the delivery of human services.

3. Third, service is a strategy for engaging young people in productive, skill-building activities. It prevents risky behavior, re-engages at-risk youth, and provides a way for young people to make healthy decisions and see their potential to create positive change for their community and country.

### **Summer of Service**

Within this context, Summer of Service is an important initiative to fill a gap in the continuum of service initiatives, because it will provide opportunities for middle school students – a population for whom very few service opportunities exist. ICP’s report on the potential for a “Summer of Service” highlights the need to focus on creating service opportunities for middle school students for the following reasons:

1. Children in middle school are too young to work and too old for many of the programs available to younger children. Summer school is often only for those who are failing, and working families may be hard-pressed to pay for adult supervision of their young teenagers. AmeriCorps members must be 18 and only limited funding is available for community-based organizations to

run programs for younger youth. There is a need to fill this gap in order to prevent risky behavior at this critical transition to adolescence.

2. Research indicates that the transition between middle school and high school is when we see a big rise in the drop-out rate. Summer of Service programs would keep children making that transition connected and help deter dropping out. Connecting Summer of Service programs with service-learning programs in schools during the academic year through Learn and Serve America would help create an academic *and* service bridge for these young people.
3. Despite the pivotal nature of the early teen years, youth-focused investments (other than education), tend to emphasize problems, not the potential of these young people. We spend money to tell teens to stay away from drugs, to keep offenders off the streets, and to discourage teen pregnancy. Yet research – and common sense – tells us that giving young people something to say ‘yes’ to is an essential part of teaching them to say ‘no.’

A universally available Summer of Service program would fill this policy gap by helping communities create positive alternatives for young teens. Developing a national system to enable all young people to participate in service as a ‘rite of passage’ would be possible, even in a tight economy, if the system were built on the existing infrastructure of service programs. Summer

of Service would be an opportunity for intergenerational service programs that would bring together seniors, young teens, older students in high schools and universities, and AmeriCorps members to work together. Senior Corps has committed to working with AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve America to make this happen.

As you proceed, I urge you to consider incorporating Summer of Service into your bill. The DeLauro and Dodd Summer of Service bills will be introduced shortly, and I urge you to contact Representative DeLauro and Senator Dodd to sign on as co-sponsors.

An example of the kind of program that the Summer of Service Bill would support is the Breakthrough Collaborative, which currently operates in 15 states, including New York, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Ohio, and Texas, and the District of Columbia. The program engages over 700 talented high school and college students in teaching more than 2,200 middle school students with limited educational opportunities every summer. The program consists of summer sessions in which the middle school students take classes in core academic subjects and work on community service projects to help them develop an awareness of the larger communities in which they live.

**Expanding service opportunities.**

In looking to the next generation of service, there is a gap between young people's desire to change their communities through service and the opportunities for civic participation available to them. We need to strengthen and expand the existing framework for national service and programs such as Learn and Serve America, Senior Corps and AmeriCorps, as well as incorporate new, scaleable ideas.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita showed the commitment of young people to their country, as many rose to the challenge and responded in large numbers to assist with rebuilding the Gulf Coast. In addition to responding to natural disasters, there are many other critical needs they can address, such as:

- helping to upgrade our infrastructure,
- reducing the backlog of projects that need to be carried out on our public lands – a backlog that now runs into the billions of dollars,
- providing energy conservation services to millions of low-income households eligible for the Weatherization Assistance Program,
- addressing the education needs of the half million high school students who annually drop out before graduation, and
- helping to deliver health care to the approximately 56 million Americans who need better access to services.

To address these national needs, several key program ideas have been developed by ICP, by members of the Voices for National Service Coalition and by other organizations that I have described in detail in my written testimony. I will only mention a few here:

1. Pathways to Teaching is a proposal ICP has developed that would tap into the 500,000 current and past AmeriCorps members as a potential pool of future teachers willing to serve in the country's most challenged schools.
2. Clean Energy Corps is a proposal for a program that would respond to the new national emergency of global warming. It would give young people and under-employed people the opportunity to serve their country by working in the field of renewable energy and energy conservation.
3. Other specific proposals include creating an Education Corps; a Health Corps; an AmeriCorps\*CCC program; a New Citizens Corps for recent immigrants; and a Disaster Readiness, Response and Recovery Corps, among others. These programs would all help fill in the continuum of service experiences and engage a diverse and inclusive population of Americans in gaining a sense of belonging to an effort greater than themselves, while at the same time, contributing to the improvement of their communities by "getting things done" and renewing the spirit of service in America.

## **Close**

All of these ideas are possible, and the committee would have many partners willing to help develop them in greater detail. We can, and should, provide every young American with the opportunity to serve his or her community and country. Our government has asked little of most of its citizens. We should all be asked to contribute to our country's security and the health of its communities. Even very young people can make important contributions and are eager to do so if provided with the opportunity. The committee is right to take action to renew the spirit of national and community service. As John Gardner said, "Freedom and responsibility, liberty and duty, that's the deal."

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify this morning. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.