

Congressional Hearing on “Renewing America through National Service and Volunteerism”

Testimony of David L. Caprara before the U.S. House
Committee on Education and Labor

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Chairman Miller and Ranking Member McKeon, Members of the Education and Labor Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony at today’s hearing on the vital topic of our national call to service. I am pleased to speak about the powerful work of volunteers serving through faith-based and community organizations and the positive impacts they are having on our nation’s most challenging social issues. I commend you for recognizing the potential of these dedicated volunteers.

I also applaud President Barack Obama for his signal leadership in making the cause of service a centerpiece of his presidency. His call to a new generation to give national and even global leadership in service to others has the potential to become a defining legacy of this Administration.

Expanding partnerships with neighborhood mediating institutions has proven to be an effective path in addressing many of the social difficulties we face as a country.

During my service at the Corporation for National and Community Service, I was tasked with leveling the playing field and advancing innovative service programs—VISTA, AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve America. I often considered the insightful words of one of my mentors, Robert Woodson, founder and president of the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, and author of the landmark book, *Triumphs of Joseph*.

Woodson, who has been frequently called to testify about grassroots community remedies by the Congress and our nation’s governors, told me that faith-based initiatives are not about promoting a particular faith, but rather, advancing secular outcomes that faith-based and other grassroots groups are uniquely positioned to effect. He notes that not only are these groups generally the closest to the problems in a community, they are the ones most often trusted by residents, particularly in times of need like our present economic crisis.

Volunteer efforts brought to bear by faith-based groups, since Tocqueville first noted our nation's founding charitable traditions and social capital in the 19th century, have been immensely important throughout America history. In fact, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, more Americans volunteer through religious groups than any other kind of organization.

A CNCS Research and Policy Development report, entitled "Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations," found that volunteers can boost both the quality of services and delivery capabilities in charities and congregations while reducing costs.

We could cite many examples of successful faith-based models, such as the Latino Pastoral Action Center of Rev. Ray Rivera in the Bronx, which has made great use of AmeriCorps volunteers in building community capacity. Southeast Idaho's Retired and Senior Volunteer Initiative and the Columbus, Ohio, based Economic and Community Development Institute serving Muslim refugees from Somalia and Ethiopia, as well as Jewish and Pentecostal Christian refugees from the former Soviet Union, provide other models.

At the Corporation, we teamed up with HHS' Administration for Children and Families in leveraging volunteer expertise with family strengthening, fatherhood and healthy marriage programs, and economic asset development with groups like People for People founded by Rev. Herb Lusk, the former Philadelphia Eagles "praying running back." Bishop Joseph Henderson converted a former juvenile detention facility into the Bragg Hill Family Life Center in Fredericksburg, Virginia, supported by Doris Buffett's Sunshine Lady Foundation. The Potters House of Bishop TD Jakes in Dallas launched a nationwide initiative promoting responsible fatherhood and ex-offender reentry with faith-based volunteers and new media technology.

AMACHI MENTORING CHILDREN OF PRISONERS INITIATIVE

I would like to touch more deeply upon two innovative program models - one, the Amachi Initiative, which utilizes CNCS volunteer resources, and another, the Violence Free Zone Initiative engaging former gang members and other forms of indigenous community volunteer capacity.

Researchers at the Cambridge University Institute of Criminology have shown that children of prisoners are far more likely to become involved in crime in the future than children from other backgrounds. The Amachi program, founded by former Philadelphia Mayor Rev. Wilson Goode, provides this vulnerable cohort of young people with caring adult mentors who help guide them to success in life, avoiding a pathway to incarceration which statistics show would too often be the case without such intervention.

Amachi, whose name in Africa means, “who knows what God will bring forth from this child,” began training faith-based organizations to play a key role in scaling up the program after its founding in Philadelphia in 2003, with the support of Big Brothers Big Sisters and area congregations. To date the initiative has enrolled 3,000 congregations as partners mentoring more than 100,000 children across America.

The Amachi mentoring model, supported by AmeriCorps members who assist recruitment of community volunteers and form congregational mentoring hubs, has proven so effective that it was adopted by the Department of Health and Human Services as the basis of the federal Mentoring Children of Prisoners program. At the Corporation for National and Community Service, it was our great honor to support Dr. Goode in helping to replicate the Amachi success with the help of Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and VISTA volunteers nationwide. We then expanded that effective approach with a new initiative of VISTA and DOJ programs that built mentoring and support hubs with faith-based and community volunteers who share their love and practical transition support for ex-offenders coming home.

VIOLENCE-FREE ZONES

Robert Woodson’s Center for Neighborhood Enterprise has developed one of the most effective gang intervention programs in our country, by tapping indigenous community healing agents and volunteers from within crime-ridden neighborhoods. The Center reaches out to former gang members who have been transformed by faith, and connects them with other adjudicated and at-risk youths in high-crime schools and community centers.

In 1997, CNE stepped in after Darryl Hall, a twelve-year-old District boy, was shot and killed in a senseless gang war between the “Circle” and “Avenue” crews and others that had already left fifty young people dead in South East Washington, DC. In partnership with the Alliance of Concerned Men, many who were ex-offenders themselves, CNE negotiated a truce and helped the young people involved gain skills and find jobs as an alternative to drug-dealing and crime. Those young people were then engaged as ambassadors of peace in their neighborhoods, motivating other youths toward positive attitudes and behaviors. Ten years later, crew-related homicides have been eliminated in the area since the intervention began.

Today CNE is expanding the reach of Violence Free Zones to cities across the country including Chicago, where a major spike in gang violence threatens to cut short the lives of our young people and their fellow neighborhood residents.

Baylor University researchers, who Woodson recently cited in testimony before the House Judiciary Committee, documented the impact of the VFZ intervention model in six Milwaukee public schools where violent incidents were reduced by 32%. Suspension rates were also dramatically reduced, and student grade point averages rose compared to the control sites.

Dramatic decreases of violent incidents where CNE grassroots leaders intervened were also reported in Baltimore, Dallas, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C.

Congress, the Administration, and private foundations would be well served to advance dynamic linkages and partnerships with such effective grassroots, faith-based programs together with the volunteer power of the Corporation for National and Community Service and programs at the Departments of Education, Labor, and Justice. Attorney General Eric Holder could be a natural leader for such a cross-sector effort. He has been a strong proponent of Violence Free Zones since their inception during his prior tenure at Justice.

I believe these initiatives represent “low-hanging fruit” if the new White House Council on Faith-Based and Community Partnerships wants to scale up such results-oriented models with expanded private sector and public support.

HURRICANE KATRINA RESPONSE

In addition to their unique quality of being deeply embedded in communities, faith-based organizations are usually much more nimble and innovative than governmental bureaucratic bodies. Take for instance the response to Hurricane Katrina. Groups like Lutheran Disaster Response, Islamic Relief USA, and the Points of Light and Interfaith Works Faith and Service Institute, directed by Rev. Mark Farr and Eric Schwarz, were able to mobilize quickly. They and countless other faith-based groups galvanized congregations, synagogues and mosques into action with donations and volunteer “boots on the ground” to help families recover, while FEMA and other agencies famously struggled to respond.

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING

Our nations’ volunteers have also made great headway in promoting global solutions. Freedom from Terror polls have noted a marked drop in support for violent terrorism and a dramatic increase in positive views toward the United States in populous Muslim nations like Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan following our national and volunteer responses after the tsunami and earthquake disasters, that were sustained beyond the initial period of aid.

According to a BLS assessment report by researchers with Washington University’s Center for Social Development, approximately 52% of global volunteers from America said their main volunteering organization was a religious one.

The International Volunteering Project at the Brookings Institution, launched at a forum with General Colin Powell nearly three years ago, has achieved solid gains in doubling a cohort from 50,000 to 100,000 international volunteers through the Building Bridges Coalition, comprised of more than 180 US-based international service NGOs, faith-based groups, universities and corporations.

Together with the national policy leadership of John Bridgeland and Senator Harris Wofford, who is here as an expert witness today, the Brookings volunteering team crafted a design for a new Global Service Fellowship initiative that would empower tens of thousands of new international service volunteers supported with modest stipends that could be redeemed by NGO and faith-based entities registered with the State Department. Global Service Fellowship legislation patterned after our research has attracted broad bipartisan support, with leadership from Senators Russ Feingold, Chris Dodd, and Norm Coleman in the Senate last year, and Representatives Betty McCollum, Mark Kirk and many others in the House and Senate. Our team also helped to craft the Service Nation global volunteering platform, which calls for doubling the Peace Corps, enacting Global Service Fellowships, and authorizing Volunteers for Prosperity at US AID.

In the past year my travels have included visits to hot spots of Israel and Palestine, Kenya, the Philippines, Brazil and other nations supporting ongoing Global Peace Festival initiatives on each continent. Through these efforts I have witnessed first hand the tremendous power of interfaith partnerships and volunteering to heal conflicts across tribal and religious divides. Upcoming Global Peace Festival initiatives in Mindanao, Jakarta, and other cities including an International Young Leaders Summit in Nairobi next month hold particular promise. Over 120 global leaders, NGOs and faith-based groups have supported the call for a new Global Service Alliance in these endeavors. Such a “global peace corps” will build a vital link between volunteering and global development to impact peacebuilding outcomes.

CLOSING

In conclusion, faith-based and community volunteers are not only effective but they are an essential element of our nation’s response to critical challenges we face at home and abroad. Now is the time for our national leaders and the private sector to tap into their full potential in light of our massive challenges ahead.

We have only begun to scratch the surface of the incredible wisdom and resources of transformative hope, embodied in today’s grassroots “Josephs.”

I hope we can rally across party lines with this President to connect and support these groups in a force for good, as proven allies in the fight against poverty and disease, gang violence, environmental degradation and global conflict and disasters. Such an alliance would show the world the full potential of America's best diplomats, our volunteers.

I would like to close by quoting Dr. King's words that my former mentor and boss Jack Kemp, the distinguished former House member and President Bush 41's HUD Secretary, often cited in his testimony:

"I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future."

Thank you very much.

**The views expressed in this testimony are exclusively those of the witness in his individual capacity, not representing any entity.*

For more information:

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www.brookings.edu/global/volunteer

www.amachimentoring.org

www.cne.online.org

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