

Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
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“The Next Generation of National Service”

Testimony of Lester Strong, CEO of Experience Corps

Good Afternoon. Thank you, Senator Mikulski, Senator Kennedy, who cannot be here today, and Senator Enzi, for convening this important hearing.

This afternoon I want to shine a light on the promise for America of an expanded, modernized national service program that engages Americans *of all ages*. I commend the Senators who have come together across party lines to craft the proposed Serve America Act and the Encore Service Act – those bills will take us toward this promise. My testimony will focus on the importance of service opportunities for an age group that, though long underrepresented within the ranks of AmeriCorps, has enormous potential to help solve our nation’s most pressing social problems.

Experience Corps is my point of reference and source of evidence and examples. It is one of many innovative, high-performing programs that are partially funded by AmeriCorps, but it is one of very few that focuses on engaging adults in their 50s, 60s, 70s and beyond. We believe our mission to focus on this age group for providing high impact service is an innovation that warrants expansion and replication. I suggest that one measure of success for the new national service legislation should be the extent to which it deploys and leverages millions of older adults to serve in a wide variety of high-impact volunteer and national service programs. Along with national and local leadership for a fresh view of adults age 50 and beyond as givers, not just receivers, this legislation can unleash unprecedented talent, experience and commitment to strengthen America’s communities.

Experience Corps was founded almost 15 years ago by John Gardner and Marc Freedman, with demonstration funding from the Corporation for National and Community Service. Its purpose is to mobilize adults age 55 and older to meet serious social and community needs. To date, our primary work has been focused on academic gains, particularly in reading, for disadvantaged children who are lagging behind in school. Nearly 2000 Experience Corps members are active this year serving 20,000 students in 23 cities. They spend from 5 to 15 hours per week (Most spend 11 to 15 hours weekly.) working primarily with first, second and third graders at neighborhood public schools. About a third of the members receive stipends through AmeriCorps. We are proud that President Obama mentioned Experience Corps as a proven model in his Call to Service.

I am new to Experience Corps this year. In the past two months as the organization's new CEO, I have visited Experience Corps members in Boston, Baltimore and Washington, DC. I've had the privilege of seeing the highly positive and significant impact so many older adults are having on the lives of thousands of our most at-risk children. I hope my comments can convey to you how encouraged I feel for the struggling inner city children who are consistently tutored by trained Experience Corps members and the powerful conviction I have that adults in my own age group (I just celebrated my 60th birthday!) can be the answer to many social ills.

I'd like to share with you a bit of personal background that explains why I feel I've found my calling in this job. In the third grade, my parents were told that I was mentally retarded and would be only marginally proficient both academically and in life. They were told that menial work was the most I should aspire to. I'm only here today because three older adults refused to believe that third grade teacher. My barber, a mother of one of my friends, and a minister gave me not only moral support but also taught me the discipline and study habits that helped me become an honor student for the rest of my public school years, then a college graduate, a broadcast journalist, a nonprofit executive, and now CEO of a major national organization.

The scary truth is that what very nearly happened to me happens all too frequently, even more than forty years later. You are well aware that our schools are failing millions of children. In our nation's 50 largest cities, only about half are graduating from high school. The statistics are even bleaker for African American and Latino children and for all poor children. One recent report suggests that one-third of poor children enter kindergarten lagging behind their peers; and by fourth grade half of these children will not be proficient in reading. President Obama recently asked every American to complete high school and a year beyond in college or job training. I submit that the job of meeting this responsibility belongs to all generations and can be effectively advanced through national service.

Independent research shows that well-structured programs can change the school trajectory of at risk students. Matching kids who are at risk of dropping behind or dropping out (yes, even in elementary school) with a trained Experience Corps tutor produces significant, critical reading skills and confidence. I hope these research studies encourage the national service community to both invest in organizations that can prove their impact and boost the incentives to engage more people in their 50s and beyond in critical service. We believe that a large cadre of people in this age group will be especially interested in the proposed "Education Corps," while many will also be attracted to the other three "corps" - Clean Energy, Healthy Futures and Opportunity.

Let me offer four reasons for including in the new legislation the strongest possible provisions for attracting, recruiting, and retaining older adults in AmeriCorps and the proposed new programs.

1. The aging of baby boomers presents unprecedented opportunity. About 78 million people were born between 1946 and 1964. Nearly 10,000 of them turn 60 every day. Research by AARP, the Corporation for National and Community Service, the MetLife Foundation and others all find that more than half of those individuals retain the idealism of their youth and want to help others. *More to Give: Tapping the Talents of the Baby Boomer, Silent and Greatest Generations*, a 2008 study by AARP of people age 44 to 79, found that most people were unimpeded by health or caring for a relative and wanted to help their communities. Of those not currently volunteering, 7 in 10 said they *had not been asked!* We cannot afford for national service to miss the opportunity to capture their talent. I've seen how teams of Experience Corps members affect individual students and the culture of entire schools – in Baltimore, Boston and Washington. The 2,000 Experience Corps members we have recruited and trained can help 20,000 students, but there are millions more who need the kind of in-depth, consistent help that can be the hallmark of modernized service programs, especially those that engage older adults.

2. Independent research has shown that Experience Corps works for children. Researchers at Washington University in St. Louis recently completed a rigorous, random assignment study, funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies, on the impact of Experience Corps tutoring on young students' reading ability. The results, which demonstrate significant, positive gains in student learning, particularly for those who are the farthest behind, will be released in April. They will show that this low cost service intervention utilizing older volunteers can produce greater academic results for low-performance kids than many other educational interventions.

Research can also document something we all know from personal experience – that good relationships can transform the lives of both the people involved. It may seem a bit magical, but these good relationships result from a wide variety of factors – training, support, evaluation, a deep belief in the ability of the kids to succeed, consistency, trust, plus the time and space in which to become friends. Older adults can draw on a wide array of life and career experiences, plus patience and the deep desire to make a difference. It works.

Let me give you an example. An Experience Corps member in Baltimore told me about a young boy in third grade, a “non-reader” who was nervous and held himself apart from children and adults alike. He was unable to concentrate on any lessons. After many weeks of the pair mainly sitting at a table while the tutor chatted or read aloud to the boy, the boy confessed that he was afraid of the other third graders. His siblings were very rough at home, putting him down and beating him up for no reason. He always worried about protecting himself. His tutor began to integrate social skills with the reading program and encouraged the boy to try them out. The teacher noticed a difference in the boy's openness to her and was able to engage him more in classroom activities. Change had begun for that boy. He started to learn to read for the first time.

3. Independent research has shown that Experience Corps works for older adults, too. Two respected universities have completed scientific studies of the impact of Experience Corps on its members. Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine reports in the *March Journal of Gerontology* that Experience Corps members doubled their level of physical activity as a result of participation in the program and that that increased activity level was sustained for at least three years. Washington University researchers found a significant, positive impact on mental health, physical functioning, and the maintenance of overall health. Members reported that they had a wider circle of friends and were more engaged in civic and community activities.

Washington University also documented the diversity of Experience Corps members and, by implication, of other older adults who may be interested in providing intensive service to children. The age range is from 50 to 87 - two+ generations! About ½ are African American and 39% white. One-third have some higher education and all have high school degrees. Incomes range from 20% who earn less than \$15,000 annually to 15% with more than \$75,000 and the rest in between.

We all need a reason to get up in the morning and for millions of people in later life, national service can be a big part of that reason. I heard a great testimonial to this aspect of service from James McDonald of Baltimore, Maryland. Upon retirement, James and his buddies pooled their funds to buy a big TV and other fun things to outfit his rec room. When his buddies moved or died, James was left alone with the TV, unhappy and unfulfilled. He said he blesses the day he found Experience Corps, where he has been serving as a tutor, classroom assistant and team leader for three days a week for four years. His health is good, his spirits are high and he's seen as a vital part of his Experience Corps team and school operations.

4. Engaging more people in the second half of life in national service will be good for all of us. The mobilization of adults in their 50's and beyond in service to their communities can be an antidote to the current economic downturn, the pessimistic long-term projections for the aging population, and the hidden costs of a deteriorating safety net. For people who have finished their full-time midlife careers, some of them prematurely due to the economy, service positions offer purpose, dignity and modest, but for some people essential stipends, to cover the additional costs of service activities outside the home. For people who want to move to nonprofit or public sector service work, the national service training and experience can be a valuable stepping stone to a job. Over time, research indicates that the continued activity and health benefits of engaging in public purpose service or work will reduce the increase in demand on Medicare. Most important, over time, the high-impact services will help prevent the devastating social and economic consequences of children who don't learn, families that don't have jobs or homes, gaps in health care and wasted energy. .

I have offered some reasons to recognize the importance of emphasizing the 50 and older age group as part of the new and very welcome Congressional initiative to encourage service by all ages, for all ages. The term "shovel ready" has entered the American lexicon, meaning ready to have significant impact immediately. I submit, when it comes to civic engagement, America's older adults are "shovel ready." Their life experiences, their workplace expertise and their maturity have prepared the healthiest and best educated generation to take on the toughest challenges America faces, and to deliver. Passage of the ServeAmerica Act is a critical step in unleashing this precious asset in service of our children, our communities and our country.

In conclusion, I thank the Committee for your attention to my testimony and to the following provisions that we believe are important to realizing the goal of robust citizen service in America:

- The Education Award under AmeriCorps may be transferred to another person and available for up to 20 years. (The transfer could be made through an approved educational savings account.)
- The time frame for providing service and receiving the education award should be extended, particularly for those serving part-time (the preference of most older adults).
- The Corporation should study, report and address additional incentives and barriers for participation by the 50+ population.
- The proposed Volunteer Generation Fund should be used in part to mobilize for service the 50+ population.
- Congress should encourage the Corporation to provide a substantial percentage of grants under Subtitles C and G to programs targeting adults age 50+, including programs with an intergenerational workforce.