

Usher Raymond IV -

General Remarks:

Thank you Chairman Miller and Chairman McCarthy for inviting me to testify before the House Education and Labor Committee. I am honored to be here today to discuss an issue that is deeply relevant to our nation and personally important to me: empowering young people to give back to their communities through service opportunities.

When I was a child, I attended the Boys and Girls Club in my home town of Chattanooga, Tennessee. It was my first real exposure to community service. It was empowering, and it made me realize that I could really make a difference, no matter what my age. Youth today are no different. When I stand on the stage and see my young fans, I am always blown away by their energy—but I am even more blown away when I come off the stage and see them in action in their community. They call this generation—my generation-- the Millennials, but I call us Generation ‘S’, for service-- because we are a generation ready to serve. Together, we are ready to change the world.

Ten years ago, I started my organization, the New Look Foundation, because I had not forgotten my early lessons about service. I didn’t just want to write checks. I wanted to be hands on. As with any young organization, we found many opportunities to positively impact the lives of others. Whether calling on youth to serve in the Gulf Coast or providing rent and utility assistance to over 750 families after Hurricane Katrina, we recognized young people today have incredible potential, drive and determination. But they need opportunities, and they need tools to succeed.

Our signature program through the Foundation, Camp New Look, was created to provide youth from under-served communities with some of those tools and opportunities they need. At Camp New Look, we have not only exposed over 2,500 youth to the business side of sports and entertainment but we seek to mentor them on how to gain careers in these multibillion dollar industries. We empower them to increase their economic status by pursuing careers in the industries that they love--- music, sports and entertainment. We guide them to higher education, shadowing and internship opportunities-we show them options they didn't know existed. Along their path of career exploration, they learn to work as a team, take risks as leaders, and be responsible for their communities.

James Harris used the skills he learned through his involvement at Camp New Look and enrolled in college, became a leader in his hometown of Kansas City, and is well on his way to being the next music industry mogul. All New Look did was give him the opportunity and the tools. He did the rest.

But there are so many more kids who need help—who need the tools and opportunities to succeed. For every young person we help, there are thousands more who are waiting to be reached. That’s why I felt compelled to come today and offer my support for National Service.

On September 11, 2008 I was honored to serve as youth chair of the ServiceNation Summit, which brought together hundreds of people to discuss how national service can help to address some of our nation’s most pressing problems. I led a workshop with a group of 100 other young leaders from across the country to discuss how we encourage and engage other young people in service. I made a pledge to them that I would be their voice whenever I had the chance to do so.

There were many suggestions and ideas that came from our time together, and I'd like to share a few of them:

1. We need to engage more youth in service, and we can do this by empowering them with the tools they need to lead. Any true change has always come about because people have come together to make their voices heard, and young people have always been among the first to lift their voices. Generation S is taking that to new levels, because of their creativity, drive and comfort by using technology to mobilize the masses. We should provide the resources to our schools to offer service learning programs where young people can put their idealism into action and learn while they are doing it. Generation S will find ways to share what they are experiencing and feeling through technology, spreading the idea across the country and around the world.

2. We need to change the perception of service within our under-served communities. Far too many young people are living in places where life is hard, the notion of service is still that of a "sentence" handed down by a judge. But we can make it cool to serve by supporting initiatives that think outside the box. There are critical issues in our under-served communities that we must begin to solve—issues like the drop-out crisis and poverty. Youth can begin to serve as positive role models, and help influence their peers to start thinking about living life in a different way, to make better choices—to stay in school, feel more connected, work towards their education. Service is an incredible thing, and should be seen as not only the right thing to do, but a cool thing to do.

3. Best in class organization like City Year and Hands On, demonstrate that National service should be a pathway for young people to develop as leaders while they gain the skills they need to succeed in life. As I have shared with you, I have seen what is possible when young people are empowered with the right tools for success. We need to continue to open the doors of opportunity for these young people to unleash their energy and help make our communities stronger. We can direct their passion into service—and reward and support their dreams by providing them with aid for college, grants, service-hour completion stipends, and encouraging corporations and colleges to match funds they receive for hours served. I can think of no greater contribution to your community than your time, and no greater reward for that time than a returned investment in your future.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., said 'the time is always right do to what is right.' Like Dr. King, this Generation 'S' is ready to do what is right, and is ready to lead the way. So today on behalf of Generation S, I am here to say.... if you give us a chance and the opportunity, we will serve!

Thank you for your time.