

TESTIMONY of
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on

*“Strengthening Communities: An Overview of Service and Volunteering
in America”*

before the

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTHY FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

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Chairwoman McCarthy, Congressman Platts, members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today about the role of service and volunteering in America.

Service is a strong and powerful point of leverage for America because it taps into America's greatest strength—her citizens. Across America, our communities are at their best, healthiest and most effective when citizens partner to tackle our toughest problems: gangs, crime, drugs, homelessness, illiteracy, children aging out of foster care, elder care, drop outs, teen pregnancy and the divide between haves and have nots. In fact, the power of American citizens in service – and in partnership with our social service delivery mechanisms – gets at the heart of nearly every issue under this committee's jurisdiction.

The Corporation for National and Community Service exists to bolster and strengthen these armies of compassion and through them the health of America's communities. Our mission is to improve people's lives, strengthen communities and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.

Today, we are witnessing an extraordinary convergence that makes this mission more powerful than it has ever been before. On the one hand, the need for our armies of compassion, of citizens armed with idealism and determination, has never been greater to improve the trajectory of the lives of young people and families struggling to reconnect to the American dream. On the other hand, we are at the same time experiencing the birth of a once in a lifetime kind of shift toward service, volunteering and civic engagement. Coming out of the smoke and ashes of 9/11 we saw Americans engaged in extraordinary acts of compassion. In his 2002 State of the Union address, the President issued a call to service in which he asked all Americans to devote 4,000 hours of their lives, or two

years, to service. He has worked hard to rally our armies of compassion and to engage citizens in moving away from the role of spectator, toward an embrace of service as a strategy for addressing some of our most intractable problems.

And millions of Americans have answered that call. Today, our research shows that overall volunteering in America is at a 30-year high. More than 2 million more Americans are volunteering than in the year following 9/11. Led by older teens, Baby Boomers, and Americans over 65, our citizens are reinventing America's entrepreneurial spirit at the community level and they are rolling up their sleeves to tackle the hard work. We at the Corporation are dedicated to doing everything we can to grow this surge of civic engagement and to ensure that these dedicated Americans have every tool at their disposal to make their service meaningful and effective, so that together we can solve problems and restore hope in our communities.

There is one trend in particular to which we must pay careful attention: older teens today are more than twice as likely to serve and volunteer as older teens in the preceding three decades. Teens today are twice as likely to volunteer than teens in the '70s, '80s and '90s. We also know that the strongest predictor of whether a person volunteers as an adult is whether he or she has volunteered in their youth. More than anything, this is the trend that is worthy of all of our consideration and as much effort as we can collectively expend, because, if we get it right, our communities and our nation could become the beneficiaries of an entire generation that is as dedicated to engagement and problem solving as what we now think of as the Greatest Generation, that reached about the same age at the onset of World War II.

Much of the power of this vision has been on display since we confronted the worst natural disaster in our history in 2005. Hurricane Katrina revealed nature at its worst. But it also showed America at its best. Thousands of volunteers came from across the United States in an unprecedented outpouring to help the residents of the Gulf coast. More than 35,000 national service participants contributed nearly 2 million hours of service to the hurricane relief and recovery efforts—clearing tons of debris, serving hundreds of meals, mucking and sanitizing thousands of homes, and most importantly renewing the hope of families and communities struggling to rebuild. And they have been a significant contributor to the more than 500,000 community volunteers who have served in the Gulf. Hurricane Katrina was a defining moment for national service. Disaster hit and we responded immediately.

But the compassion we see in the Gulf was not an isolated event; it happens every day in cities and towns across America.

We see our powerful national service programs and idealistic members and program participants as an important part of the scaffolding upon which our communities build some of their most effective citizen engagements and community volunteer activities. The five major national service programs that the Corporation supports are all dedicated to supporting serious problem solving through citizen engagement.

For 40 years, Senior Corps programs have been at the forefront of engaging older Americans in meeting pressing needs. Through the Foster Grandparent program, older Americans spend an average of 20 hours a week inside the schools and youth centers of some of America's most poverty stricken communities, supporting and mentoring children who need to know that a caring adult is on their side. And Senior Companions

come into the homes to maintain the dignity and independence of those who are otherwise too frail or elderly to live on their own. RSVP connects older Americans with a plethora of service opportunities through more than 70,000 nonprofit and faith-based groups across the country. In total, more than 500,000 older Americans serve their communities through one of these Senior Corps programs.

The basic deal of AmeriCorps is simple: idealistic Americans spend a year of service helping meet critical needs in education, public safety, health and the environment. And at the end of their year of service AmeriCorps members receive a scholarship of nearly \$4,725 to pay for their future education – or to repay their student loans. The AmeriCorps network of local, state, and national service programs engages more than 75,000 Americans in intensive service each year. AmeriCorps members serve through thousands of nonprofits, public agencies, and faith-based and community organizations.

Later this year, AmeriCorps will reach a milestone when more than 500,000 Americans have taken the pledge to “Get Things Done.” And I’m proud to note that most of those members will have taken that pledge since President Bush took office.

VISTA is the anti-poverty and capacity building arm of AmeriCorps, born out of the War on Poverty and 6,600 strong. These VISTAs are America’s domestic equivalent to Peace Corps volunteers, living, serving, and bringing meaningful change to America’s most poverty-stricken communities by engaging their citizens in the arduous work of lifting themselves out of poverty.

Under AmeriCorps’ NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps), dedicated 18-24 year-olds receive special training and work in full-time team-based residential programs and travel across the country to tackle one urgent problem after another; their rapid

ability to deploy and expertise were on particular display during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, where they were among the first on the ground and remain a strong force multiplier today.

Learn and Serve America is the on-ramp to a lifetime of service. Through educational grants to K-12 schools, universities, and community organizations, Learn and Serve America fosters service-learning programs nationwide. Service-learning is a teaching method that combines service with classroom learning. All of our research shows that service-learning reduces risky behavior, improves academic achievement, and is the best predictor of a child's civic engagement as an adult.

Part of the power of the national service network is that in every state and territory we have governor-appointed state service commissions. Commissions oversee most of the national service activities in each state, especially AmeriCorps programs and the Commission is also usually the organization charged by the Governor with encouraging volunteering and civic engagement statewide and driving key statewide social priorities like literacy and mentoring. The Corporation also has field offices representing and providing additional resources to every state and territory.

Another ingredient of the success of national service is that it is a public-private partnership. Each year the Corporation's grantees collectively raise \$375 million in non-Corporation funds –and the vast majority of these funds are private. This partnership helps to leverage federal dollars and ensures local buy-in for the programs we fund.

A growing body of research demonstrates that volunteers not only improve reading scores when they tutor, or make it more likely that youth will be successful in life by mentoring, but the thousands of things volunteers do represent the social glue that

translates into the health of our communities. Just as one can build financial capital, individuals who volunteer build a community's "social capital." Americans who volunteer are also likely to vote, know their neighbors, and be engaged in local affairs. Indeed, you will find that communities with higher levels of volunteering are also places where people have greater trust and knowledge of their neighbors. This means that communities with a higher level of volunteering and other forms of community life exhibit such attributes as strong parental engagement in schools, low crime rates, and even economic prosperity.

As the Subcommittee considers the opportunities that service provides to create healthier families and communities, I'd like to quickly hit on some of the challenges where the upside of citizen engagement is the most compelling, where American citizens have the best opportunities to make a difference in the lives of those who are hurting and to solve some of the key issues that plague America today.

The President has often spoken of the challenge of supporting the 7 million children who have one or more parent in prison. Without effective intervention, 70 percent of these children are likely to follow their parents' path, ending up in prison themselves. Corporation programs are engaging citizens across the country to make inroads in combating this generational despair.

One of the projects we support is a program, Amachi, which was started in Philadelphia by the former mayor, the Reverend Wilson Goode. Amachi engages, trains and supports Americans, mostly from the faith community, who take on the challenge and reward of mentoring children of prisoners. We know that one volunteer mentoring a child of a prisoner can cut the likelihood of that child going to prison in half. With our

VISTA members, AmeriCorps grants, and Senior Corps participants supporting a rapid scaling strategy, Amachi has grown.

Another great challenge facing us is the 20,000 young people who age out of the foster care system each year. At a crucial age when so many Americans are being shepherded by their parents, many of these kids have no one to help them get a job or continue their education.

We have AmeriCorps VISTA members helping bridge that gap for this vulnerable population in many different states. In California, for example, the Foster Youth Empowerment Service Center serves at-risk children and youth in the high desert region of San Bernadino County. The program concentrates on foster youth who have become or are in danger of becoming homeless when they age out of foster care. The center brings together crucial resources to foster youth ages 16 to 21. VISTAs set up a database to establish each youth's needs and goals and they coordinate with community partners to develop programs to assist young people in designing an individual transition plan based on the youth's needs assessment.

And in Washington state, we are about to launch a crucial VISTA program that provides mentors for children aging out of care. Without these key interventions, many of these young people would fall into lives of crime and despair.

Too often people think of disadvantaged youth as clients to be served instead of leaders and problem solvers. As the First Lady has made clear with her Helping America's Youth initiative, society is better served when we understand that children are our best assets. When you connect disadvantaged youth to service, you build their confidence, give them a sense of personal responsibility, lower their sense of victim

hood, and give them a tangible sense that they can make a difference in their life and the lives of others.

While the problems are great, we can work towards solutions. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 15 percent of America's teens use illicit drugs and the abuse of prescription drugs is on the rise: Oxycontin use among eighth graders has doubled since 2002 and one in ten high school seniors abuse Vicodin. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reported in 2003 that 23 out of every 1000 teenage girls aged 15-17 became teen mothers and 18 percent of America's youth live at or below the poverty level. An estimated 760,000 youth are involved in gangs. The FBI reports that in 2005 law enforcement agencies arrested 1.5 million young people under the age of 18; therefore youth account for 15 percent of all arrests. We can prevent more young people from becoming part of these crime statistics not only by providing services to them, but by engaging them in supporting their own communities.

We have research showing when we engage disadvantaged youth in service, we greatly enhance their chances for success. Kids engaged in serving their own troubled communities are less likely to engage in risky behavior, are more likely to graduate and go to college. In fact, service is one of the best and most effective interventions for youth in disadvantaged circumstances, one of the most compelling reasons that service is no longer simply a nice thing to do; it is necessary to the health of our nation.

Let me give you an example of how this works. In Nassau County, New York, more than 300 students—all of whom are at risk, pregnant, and have other physical and emotional needs-- participate in a Learn and Serve America program, operated by the Nassau Board of Cooperative Educational Services, providing service to veterans, seniors

in nursing homes, children and the homeless. The program works in nine schools and alternative learning centers and has partners with multiple community agencies, including the Department of Veterans Affairs, public libraries and early childhood centers. This incredible program gives youth who are used to being recipients of service the opportunity to be the service provider. It greatly increases their self esteem and reinforces classroom learning.

Think of the power of engaging our young people who are not contending with disadvantaged circumstances. Imagine if on every college campus we engaged students in solving some of the problems of their local communities. We know from a study we published last fall that college student volunteering is up—by 20 percent. But still only one-third of students on campus volunteer; that's not enough. We have more work to do to engage the other two-thirds to make a powerful difference in the lives of young people in communities across America.

And the opportunity to use service as an intervention that can change the course of the life of the person serving is not only applicable to youth. Some of our most powerful work is going on in connecting citizen service with the field of prisoner re-entry. Never before in our society have we had more people coming out of prison than going in. Nearly 650,000 people are released from state and federal prison yearly and arrive on the doorsteps of communities nationwide. A far greater number re-enter communities from local jails, and for many offenders and defendants, this may occur multiple times in a year. According to the Department of Justice, over 50 percent of those released from incarceration will be in some form of legal trouble within 3 years. Among some populations recidivism can reach as high as 80 percent.

Those coming out of prison need a job, a place to live, and connection to society. It's the connection to society that can serve as a gateway to all of the elements of success, supporting them in getting a job and a place to live, connecting them to faith-based and community groups that give them a sense of purpose and creating a gateway for them to thrive.

In fact, we are particularly excited about service work in the realm of re-entry because we are building powerful models of collaboration with other federal agencies. In 30 cities we have 140 VISTAs who are participating with community based organizations collaborating with Department of Justice Weed and Seed sites to build re-entry programs.

One of these great re-entry projects is the Potter's House in the Dallas area which sponsors a VISTA program that works with local Department of Justice Weed and Seed sites. The VISTAs serve in five cities with the highest number of prisoners being released into the state of Texas. The VISTAs recruit and create volunteer curricula for training mentors and volunteers on how to best meet the needs of this population. The VISTAs also link resources to ex-offenders so they have the opportunity to succeed and not recidivate back to the prison system.

In Bend, Oregon, one of our AmeriCorps grantees—a group called Civic Justice Corps -- engages prison inmates in meaningful service. Sadly, the director Dennis Maloney, passed away earlier this month. But before his passing, he built an incredible program.

Dennis gave up a promising NFL career to become a VISTA member. After VISTA, he started work in the field of corrections and eventually became a prison warden. Knowing the power of service from his VISTA days, Dennis encouraged the prison staff

to create service projects to engage the inmates rather than impose harsh penalties from the top down. Inmates didn't serve in punitive ways—such as in chain gangs, but in constructive ways. The community loved the idea. The inmates built the Bend Child Abuse Advocacy Center, Habitat for Humanity homes, and a local homeless shelter. They served their community and they also received great job skills. Because of Dennis' work, 30 states have rewritten the purpose clause of their juvenile code to include service as part of their juvenile justice systems.

As we look at all of these pressing issues, we must remember to view them as part of the large demographic shift that is taking place in America. We are moving into a time where our traditional workforce will be half of what it is today as a percentage of our population. The fastest growing age group in America is aged 85 and older, and they are a major driver of health care costs. In 2020, approximately 1 in 6 Americans will be aged 65 or older. By 2050, when the Baby Boomers will be age 85 and older, there will be over 86 million people older than 65 living in the United States, compared to 35 million today.

Last year with the passage of the Older Americans Act, you considered some of these issues. We would urge you, as a Subcommittee, as you continue to consider what it means to have healthy families and communities, to view this demographic shift as the largest opportunity of all. Imagine if retiring Baby Boomer teachers were willing to tutor and mentor disadvantaged youth. Or older business people could provide business advice and career counseling. Or retired doctors, nurses, and trained medical personnel could provide health care services to low-income and elderly neighbors.

Last year Corporation programs delivered independent living services to over 100,000 frail or elderly Americans. In Pima County, Arizona for example, Senior Companions help older or disabled clients at a family services program live with more independence and dignity. In 2006 alone Senior Companions served nearly 1000 clients. More often than not, friendships and long lasting bonds of trust develop between Senior Companions and clients, thus lessening the isolation and depression that can afflict so many older Americans.

Despite these great successes, we still have a lot of work to do. With our board of directors, the Corporation, has developed a bold strategic plan (I have copies here for you today) that is harnessing America's volunteers to tackle key problems in this country.

- First, we plan to grow the numbers of Americans volunteering to 75 million by 2010. To move towards this goal, we have made volunteer leveraging a priority in our grants, promoted online volunteer matching, are working to enhance volunteer infrastructure, management and retention, and we have published half a dozen reports on trends in volunteering to serve as a roadmap to best recruit volunteers.
- Second, by 2010 we hope to increase the numbers of Boomers in service by 3.2 million to 29 million. At the White House Conference on Aging, we launched a national campaign, called "Get Involved," to tap the vast experience of the a highly educated, healthy, and skilled cohort of 77 million Baby Boomers to serve and give back.
- Third, we will motivate the enthusiasm of college students and plan to increase the number of college students engaged in community service by 2.7 million to 5 million by 2010. Things are moving in the right direction. In a survey of college

freshman, the Higher Education Research Institute reported that two out of every three entering college students believe it is essential or very important to help others who are in difficulty, which is the highest level it has been in the last 25 years. We were overwhelmed by the response to the first-ever President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll—a program that recognizes outstanding community service on college campuses. Over 500 colleges applied in its first year.

- And finally, we know that service instilled at a young age can lead to service habits that last a lifetime and help youth take ownership of their problems, rather than feeling like victims. Therefore our plan calls to engage 3 million youth and children from disadvantaged circumstances in service and provide mentoring to 5.5 children and youth, since we know that 15 million at risk youth do not have a mentor. Last year we launched a Federal Mentoring Council and a National Mentoring Working Group, comprised of leading nonprofit and private sector groups who work with disadvantaged youth.

As our Board Chairman Steve Goldsmith, the former mayor of Indianapolis, said when the strategic plan was launched, “We believe that a better future for all Americans will include a more widespread culture of service, more opportunities for all young people to succeed, more schools that encourage citizenship, and more older Americans using their lifetime of skills to give back to their communities. “

We are excited about where we are going as an agency. To help us move towards our goals, the President has submitted another strong budget request--of \$828.7 million--for the Corporation in fiscal year 2008. This budget, which will support 75,000 AmeriCorps

members, over 500,000 Senior Corps members, and 1.3 million Learn and Serve America participants, is an important sign of this nation's commitment to service. It also provides key resources, leveraging the work of a national network of partners that engage volunteers, from state and local government to businesses to nonprofit, faith-based, and community groups.

The challenges our nation faces are daunting. But since the early days of this republic, volunteers and an engaged citizenry have made America great. Again, we must focus on what we owe today's 16-19 year olds, who are twice as likely as the generation before them to volunteer.

Our job is to fan that spark because our nation can't hope to achieve its potential unless we all do our part.

The Corporation's mission—to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering—has never been more important or more connected to the most pressing social challenges of our day. We look forward to working with this committee to meet the challenges of our time.

