

Summary of Public Hearings – National Service

On March 28, 2019, the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service hosted two public hearings at the Annenberg Conference Center in College Station, Texas. Each hearing featured an expert panel who gave opening statements and answered questions from Commissioners. Time at the end of each hearing was reserved for members of the public to offer comments. Complete hearing materials, including a recording of the hearing, a preparatory memo drafted by Commission staff, and panelists' written testimony are available at: <https://inspire2serve.gov/content/hearings>.

National Service Hearing: Improving Current National Service Policies and Processes

The morning hearing addressed the challenges of the current national service system in America and discussed options to improve individuals' access to, awareness of, and aspiration for national service.

Michelle K. Brooks, Chief of Staff, Peace Corps, shared that the Peace Corps has recently improved their application process, emphasized youth outreach and a continuum of service, and marketed the domestic benefits of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCV). Some considerations shared with the Commission included: extending and improving noncompetitive eligibility; expanding loan forgiveness programs; and, enabling federal employees to pursue short-term national service before reemployment.

Chris Bugbee, Chief Operating Officer, OneStar Foundation, testified that significant barriers hinder the full potential of national service. He shared that OneStar would suggest improving current national service opportunities before increasing the number of national service opportunities. To address service barriers, OneStar supports the idea of a coordinated national marketing campaign. Mr. Bugbee recommended simplifying the AmeriCorps grant process, emphasizing program flexibility for rural and faith-based communities, and utilizing part-time service opportunities to engage diverse populations.

AnnMaura Connolly, President for Voices for National Service and Chief Strategy Officer and Executive Vice President of City Year, Inc., emphasized the importance of both improving and expanding current national service opportunities. Ms. Connolly specifically recommended improvements and modernizations to AmeriCorps' expectations of its grantees, increasing the national service living stipend, and reforming Senior Corps into a competitive grant program. She further recommended increasing the visibility of national service opportunities for more Americans by utilizing public and private partners and improving compensation for servicemembers by including wrap-around services.

Pierre Nguyen, Disaster Response Programs Manager, Texas Conservation Corps of American YouthWorks, shared how his personal service experiences with JROTC, the American Red Cross, and NCCC FEMA Corps led to him working with YouthWorks. Through these experiences he came to see the importance of improving access to underserved populations and recommended modernizing the Segal Award and expanding service opportunities through both current and new models.

Barbara Stewart, CEO, Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), testified that national service is defined by a sustained service commitment, shared state and local control, public-private partnerships, and impact-driven opportunities. She indicated that growing and improving national service should be pursued, and recommended a strong focus be placed on accessibility and expansion of existing partnerships. CNCS is in the midst of implementing their "Transformation and Sustainability Plan" to strengthen, streamline, and simplify that agency's efforts.

Commissioners asked panelists whether they would prioritize improving or expanding national service and how to improve national service programs, branding and partnerships.

National Service Hearing: Creating More National Service Opportunities

The afternoon hearing focused on means to expand national service, including requirements for new sources of funding and program models, systems, infrastructures, and/or partnerships.

Kaira Esgate, CEO, America's Service Commissions, presented a number of options to strengthen the role of state service commissions in the national service ecosystem. Ms. Esgate recommended waiving match requirements for programs in underserved communities like smaller and rural areas, reducing administrative burdens on programs, and providing flexibility to combine federal funds. She also encouraged innovative efforts like the Encore Service program in the Serve America Act as ways to engage more Seniors to service instead of restructuring Senior Corps programs as competitive grants.

Brian Larkin, Program Officer of Flint, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, discussed the Flint National Service Accelerator initiative (the Accelerator), funded in part by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and the four ways it helps nonprofits through national service. Mr. Larkin believes the Accelerator model could be replicated in other places with the support from public-private partnerships, and notes that while the Accelerator addresses targeted local issues, needs would be different in other communities.

Natalye Paquin, Esq., President and CEO, Points of Light, shared that she wants to make national service relevant and accessible for all, including the next generation. Ms. Paquin highlighted the Points of Light pilot Starbucks Fellows programs and she believes more employer-led programs could be created or incentivized. She testified that not all companies can afford to replicate this model, but the private sector is already engaging with CNCS, and could do more.

Shirley Sagawa, CEO and Founder, Service Year Alliance, discussed how Service Year Alliance is helping them create the conditions to locally scale national service opportunities in eleven communities across the nation. Ms. Sagawa believes state and local plans should build awareness to engage students no later than middle school. Ms. Sagawa noted her support for a flexible service model in which organizations are certified by an accreditation agency to host service fellows.

Jaime Ernesto Uzeta, CEO, Public Allies, reviewed how the Public Allies apprenticeship model promotes diversity, inclusion, and equity. He noted most "Allies" are recruited from historically underserved and underrepresented communities and they find their purpose, gain 21st century skills, become self-determined and pursue multiple pathways after service. Ms. Uzeta encouraged the Commission to support recommendations that engage youth of less privileged backgrounds into national service and broadening the number of publicly supportive national service opportunities.

Questions by Commissioners revealed that panelists support place-based community efforts, innovative pilot demonstrations, replicating effective models, and finding the right partners to address local needs.

During the time reserved for public comments in both hearings, some attendees shared their personal service stories and the challenges they faced while pursuing national service. Other attendees offered thoughts on what policy recommendations the Commission should focus on and provided policy solutions to approach local and national awareness campaigns.