

Summary of Public Hearings – Universal Service

On February 21, 2019, the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service hosted two hearings, which were open to the public, at American University in Washington, D.C. Each hearing featured a panel of experts who made 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 information about each hearing, including a preparatory memo drafted by Commission staff, written testimony from each panelist, and ways to provide written comments to the Commission, is available at: <https://inspire2serve.gov/content/hearings>. A recording of the hearings can be seen on Facebook (@Inspire2ServeUS) or via C-Span at: <https://www.c-span.org/organization/?132402/National-Commission-Military-National-Public-Service-NCMNPS>.

Universal Service Hearing: Inspiring Universal Service Across America

The morning hearing focused on ways to encourage Americans to voluntarily serve the nation through military, national, public, and other forms of service by expanding access to service opportunities and creating a culture in which Americans are expected—but not required—to serve. Panelists shared their organizations' different approaches to promoting service.

Tom Chabolla, President of Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC), explained how JVC's faith-based approach serves the community while creating growth experiences for Jesuit Volunteers, young adults who commit to a full-time term of service assisting a not-for-profit partner organization. He indicated that higher education debt increasingly prevents motivated individuals from pursuing a year of service. He recommended expanding debt reduction programs for service-program participants, and he also proposed extending benefits provided to certain AmeriCorps and Peace Corps alumni, such as education grants and noncompetitive eligibility for federal employment, to participants in other service programs that are not sponsored by the U.S. government.

Dr. Robert Grimm, Director of the Do Good Institute at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy, shared how the university's Do Good Institute has engaged college students across academic disciplines in service-learning opportunities using innovative approaches, such as prize competitions and venture seed funding for social entrepreneurs. The institute seeks to foster a norm of "universal voluntary service" by helping students to develop their areas of interest, obtain leadership skills, and make an impact. He recommended creating more, high-quality service opportunities, especially hands-on, service-based education integrated into school curricula; sponsoring prize competitions to spur social action to address national or local challenges; considering a service requirement for youth; and designating a federal agency to advocate for the not-for-profit sector.

Jeff West, Corporate Responsibility Leader at IBM Corporation, said IBM operates a Corporate Service Corps, which sends teams of IBM employees to implement short-term projects to meet community needs in emerging markets while also building technical and intercultural skills for participants. To sustain such programs for the long term, he emphasized that investor-owned organizations must establish a business case for devoting employee time and corporate funds to service. For IBM, the investment in human capital—developing employees who are ready to lead a global organization—is the essential benefit to the company that has made this approach sustainable.

Teresa Walch, National Vice President at Boys & Girls Clubs of America, described how club programming develops a culture of volunteerism and civic engagement among youth participants. Clubs serve as a partner for local service-learning programs focused on peer mentoring, and clubs across the country, including those

serving tribal youth, host AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers who help these clubs build volunteer capacity. She encouraged the Commission to engage with and ask younger Americans for their recommendations to expand participation in service. She also recommended greater federal support for service organizations, such as through expanded appropriations and tax incentives.

Commissioners asked questions about how to improve access to service opportunities, engage Americans who are less motivated to serve, and facilitate a broader culture of service.

More information about this hearing is available at: <https://inspire2serve.gov/node/137>.

Universal Service Hearing: Should Service be Mandatory?

The afternoon hearing addressed the question of whether Americans should be required to devote some period of service to the nation, such as one or more years of military, national, or public service.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, argued in opposition to required service. He cited legal, practical, and philosophical objections, such as the Constitution's ban on involuntary servitude and the potential for negative outcomes for individuals who are forced to serve. He also said that service does not necessarily yield greater value for society than work in the private sector, adding that society's needs could be addressed more effectively and efficiently in other ways.

Dr. William Galston, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, indicated that, while he previously advocated for obligatory service and still agrees with service requirements in principle, he now believes the concept to be impractical. Instead, he encouraged the Commission to recommend quadrupling the number of opportunities to serve in AmeriCorps from roughly 75,000 to 300,000 national service members per year. He said that a broad expansion of AmeriCorps slots would increase the visibility of national service and might begin to shift social norms toward an expectation of service.

Ted Hollander, a retired businessman and author, endorsed a service requirement that would apply specifically to young adults, primarily for the purposes of building life skills for participants and increasing understanding between individuals from different cultural, economic, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds. He argued that individuals who complete mandatory service would be better prepared for higher education, the workforce, and participation in society as citizens.

Lucy Steigerwald, a freelance journalist, opposed mandatory service. She argued that service requirements are solutions in search of a problem and that individuals should be able to make their own choices about what to do with their lives. Further, she expressed concerns that service mandates focused on young adults would delay personal growth and maturation while increasing dependence on government. She also argued against mandatory military service and called for the abolishment of the Selective Service System.

Questioning by Commissioners revealed a greater degree of openness among panelists regarding service requirements that would apply to minors, such as by integrating a semester of service, service summer, or service-learning requirement within K-12 curricula.

During the time reserved for public comments, some attendees spoke in favor of and others spoke in opposition to mandatory service. A speaker suggested that the military reconsider its medical standards for accessions, arguing that current policy unnecessarily excludes Americans who want to serve.

More information about this hearing is available at: <https://inspire2serve.gov/node/136>.