



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND
PUBLIC SERVICE

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Subject: Roundtable Discussion with Faith Leaders and Volunteers in Waco, Texas

The following is a record of a roundtable discussion with Commissioners and faith leaders and volunteers, which took place on July 19, 2018, at the Chamber of Commerce in Waco, Texas. At the meeting, participants discussed the role of faith-based communities in national service. The conversation was facilitated by Mr. Ed Allard and included several Commission members; some members of the staff were present. This memorandum is protected by the deliberative process privilege and should be treated as For Official Use Only. This memorandum is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

Attendees:

- Commissioners: Chairman Joe Heck, Dr. Janine Davison, Mr. Ed Allard, Ms. Jeanette James, Mr. Alan Khazei
- Commission Staff: Kent Abernathy, Paul Lekas, Jill Rough, Erin Schneider, Sandy, Jeff McNichols, Brian Collins
- Central Texas faith leaders, volunteers, and national service leaders [this event was held on a not-for-attribution basis]

Key Takeaways:

- Faith communities are heavily involved in service—including national service programs—in Texas.
- Participants felt awareness of AmeriCorps is very low among Texans.
- Participants thought AmeriCorps should be advertised more extensively to young adults.
- Participants felt civic life in Waco has improved significantly over the last two decades.
- Divisions between Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities in Texas exist.
- Several participants expressed support of registration of women with Selective Service.

Meeting Discussion

Mr. Allard introduced the session and provided background about the Commission, which was followed by a round of introductions. *He asked how faith-based communities are participating in national, military, and public service in Waco and throughout Texas.*

A participant said that the Waco Jewish community has recently made stronger efforts to reach out to the Fort Hood community, including holding regular services at Fort Hood.

A participant who operates an AmeriCorps program that is run by a faith-based institution said that they employ dozens of VISTA volunteers and run a summer AmeriCorps program that engages 6,000 congregations and faith-based not-for-profit organizations around the state to address hunger, such as serving meals to students after school and during the summer break. Volunteers help form and staff coalitions that yield public-private partnerships to address food insecurity. They receive dozens or hundreds of applications for every VISTA or community organizing position they post.

Mr. Allard *asked how to motivate young people to get involved in these programs.*

One participant said that it can be hard for Muslim youth to get involved because of a perception that they are not welcome. He shared an experience of trying to connect with a program, but not hearing a response which led him to conclude the program did not respond to people who have Islamic-sounding names. He noted many physicians and psychiatrists who work at Fort Hood worship at the local mosque in Waco. He noted he had several friends who wanted to join the military, but their parents discouraged them from joining out of fear that they would be targeted.

Dr. Heck *asked if the Muslim community has seen the same response to national service, such as Peace Corps and AmeriCorps.*

The same participant said that national is better, but local service has the same issues—for example, a volunteer firefighter service did not respond to a Muslim applicant. Even though the crime rate among Muslim Americans is very low and most are productive members of society, the stigma is real.

Mr. Khazei *said AmeriCorps is a great place for people to meet each other and break down stereotypes and asked if Muslim youth knew about or had participated in AmeriCorps.*

The same participant said that he had not heard of AmeriCorps.

Another participant said that their synagogue is very active with charities, but they have also found that most faith-based not-for-profits are nondenominational Christian-based, and they do not necessarily involve Muslims, Bahai, or Jews. He added, “We don’t get asked.”

Mr. Khazei *asked if they ever do joint service projects, though some of the participants seemed to think he was referring to interfaith religious services.*

Multiple participants said that they do. One said that they always do a service for Thanksgiving that includes different faiths—interdenominational and nonsectarian.

Mr. Khazei *clarified, asking again about service projects.*

One participant said that service projects through Habitat for Humanity brings people together. He said that younger people are more open minded, but those who held power in Waco are more resistant to work across denominational lines.

Mr. Allard asked how others would gauge the civic health of Waco.

Another participant agreed with the previous speaker about the changing attitudes among young people and said that the civic health in Waco had greatly improved in the last 20 years.

Mr. Khazei asked what caused the change.

A participant mentioned the growth of Baylor University and said, “We can’t deny the Magnolia effect—it’s a new day in Waco, and it’s refreshing.”

Mr. Allard asked if population growth had contributed.

A participant answered yes, adding that younger folks moving to the community bring fresh ideas.

Another participant said that a lot of young adults leave Waco after college because there are limited job opportunities in Waco.

One of the younger participants agreed, saying he was planning to leave Waco after graduation for medical school.

A participant said that the biggest private employer in Waco is L3 Communications, and they are reducing their workforce. There is an influx of people who attend Baylor, but they do not stay after graduation.

Another participant said that the city is working hard to attract younger adults, such as offering technology and other support for those starting businesses. The participant said that the Millennial generation is as service-oriented as the Greatest Generation, adding that Baylor now has more than 40 organizations on campus involved in eradicating hunger, compared to one organization that existed in the 1990s. The challenge is how to channel the desire to serve in ways that are productive toward the common good.

Mr. Allard agreed about seeing the desire to serve among young people. He asked what can the faith-based community do to encourage people to continue to serve?

A participant said that every major faith tradition encourages followers to care for strangers and feed the hungry.

Another participant contrasted the punitive public approach to the immigration crisis with the “when I was a stranger, you invited me” faith-based approach. He said that the nation is good at responding to disasters (like Hurricane Harvey). For the faith community to join, the public tone surrounding issues like immigration will need to involve compassion, which he felt was a critical component of the faith-based response.

Dr. Heck asked how to break down barriers between national service organizations and faith-based communities. He also asked if state-level efforts with faith-based initiatives could be replicated at the national level.

A participant said that, in Texas, national service is driven by local organizations, which have been heavily involved in long-term disaster recovery. Most of those organizations are faith-based. The Texas state service commission has provided an infusion of money to help those efforts, along with the “glue” that helps them do what they need in their communities.

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Another participant said “it would be nice if there were a good news section in the paper,” and a journalist who joined to listen to the conversation responded and asked if one of the participants would share how a disaster galvanized and transformed their town.

The participant to whom the question was directed said that the community had galvanized after the disaster and their emotional health strengthened after the recovery. He agreed that millennials are ready and eager to serve, though he noted that millennials tend not to trust institutions in the way that the Greatest Generation did—the challenge is to help them find a way to serve like they want to without forcing them into institutions they do not necessarily trust, which includes organized religion. He added, “Let your town blow up and you better hope organized religion shows up—it did show up. Many religions, all kinds of people, but they were part of organized structures. I think organized religion gets a bad rap because we can’t do a lot of what we need to do without it.”

Another participant asked if the disaster increased awareness of national service opportunities.

The participant confirmed that there was a tremendous rise in volunteerism.

Another participant said before the disaster, no one had heard of RSVP—now they know. They shared their experiences with a nationwide service network of RV owners, age 55 and older, who respond to disasters.

Dr. Heck said that is an excellent observation and noted that, unfortunately, it took a calamity to galvanize the community and increase awareness of service. *He asked, “How do you accomplish those goals short of a disaster?”*

A participant said that his organization, an AmeriCorps grantee, is based in Austin but recruits participants nationwide. Many move to Austin for one year of service, try it, and do “corps hopping,” trying different programs they hear about while volunteering. Others join because they found it on a job board and saw it had a living stipend—they do not know about national service in advance. They are not motivated by the money—they care about it because of the service. He said that, for the military, people know what it is about before they sign up. For AmeriCorps and faith-based service organizations, they find out what it is later, experience satisfaction, and come back.

The journalist asked, “What gets them to sign up in the first place?”

The participant answered, for millennials, luck—they tend to be looking for something but are not sure what, and they are lucky enough to find something. If they know about it in advance, it is probably because they experienced a disaster, and AmeriCorps helped. He acknowledged that awareness of national service opportunities is low.

Another participant explained that part of the challenge is that federal funding is not used to promote national service. External organizations partners can advertise, but that is not an effective way to promote the AmeriCorps brand name, adding, “Peace Corps has been around so long, and we say AmeriCorps is the domestic Peace Corps,” but it is not well known. She said that sometimes adults should get out of the way of young people and give them a chance to lead now.

Ms. James returned to the question of whether women ages 18 through 25 should be required to register for Selective Service.

One participant, a pastor, said he was surprised when he read the questions because he assumed that when all opportunities to serve in the military were opened that the means of getting to those

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opportunities were also opened, adding, “I was surprised they are not already part of the system. I’d say, let’s do it.”

Another two participants agreed.

One participant said they would like to see women register with Selective Service, but if they do not want to join the military, they should be able to join a service organization.

A younger participant said that equality is a hot topic for youth, and that it is only fair that both men and women should register and have equal access to the draft.

Mr. Allard thanked the group for their thoughts and what they give to the nation.

A participant offered a quick observation: “I have preached and taught that we need to serve our communities. It has never occurred to me that volunteering also serves our nation, and that’s one thing folks like me need to communicate.”

Another participant said that her son wants to serve but not in traditional ways, like pancake suppers. He wants to do something more substantial, and his peers have the same attitude.

A younger participant said that AmeriCorps needs to advertise more—he said he was very active in all kinds of groups in college, but had never heard of AmeriCorps.

Another participant said that VISTA has a new presence at Baylor, and he added that he thinks the desire to have a more substantial effect is not particular to young adults. He said, “We want to see systems change in the U.S.” Organizing around hunger attracted the support of every faith community and bipartisan political support. He said the nation needs to find ways to comprehensively address these sorts of problems.

Mr. Allard concluded the meeting.