



Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Testimony to the Corporation for National and Community Service

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Representatives:

I am pleased to offer testimony on the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act,¹ which holds the promise to foster the civic engagement of millions of Americans for the years to come and has instilled hope throughout our country.

As a doctoral student at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, I study employment and civic engagement among middle-aged and older adults. I've come here today because The Corporation for National Community Service (CNCS) has asked for the community's input on a wide range of areas that pertain to the expansion, implementation, evaluation, and innovation of the Serve America Act. I'd like to share some ideas on two areas: (i) how to demonstrate the impact of service, and (ii) how to expand opportunities to serve.

PART I: Demonstrating Impact

Question: How do we better demonstrate impact? And what should we measure?

Below are studies that have empirically documented the impact of service roles on older adults, recipients of service (i.e., children in tutoring programs), family and friends of older adult volunteers, and greater society. These studies offer insight into methodological issues and scientific instruments that are best-suited to measure these impacts.

1. Demonstrating the impact on the older adult volunteer or fellow.

Three briefs authored by the Center for Social Development (CSD) demonstrate ways to measure impacts of volunteering on older adults: "Benefits of volunteering" (Morrow-Howell, McCrary, Gonzales, et al., 2008a), "Changes in activity associated with participation" (Morrow-Howell, McCrary, Hong, et al., 2008), and "Health outcomes of participation" (Morrow-Howell, Hong, McCrary, et al., 2009). Each refers to standardized and self-report instruments that were used in CSD's study of Experience Corps, an inter-generational tutoring program that places older adults in public schools to help students develop reading skills. Results suggest that the service role was beneficial for everyone who was involved.

¹ The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, signed into law by President Obama on April 21, 2009, seeks to expand existing national service programs, such as AmeriCorps and VISTA, and creates several new programs aimed specifically at recruiting older adults into national and community service.

In addition, Hinterlong and Williams (2007) provide an extensive literature review that demonstrates that various forms of engagement are good for older adults (Everard et al., 2000; Glass et al., 1999). In brief, civic engagement is associated with better health and fewer depressive symptoms (Morrow-Howell et al. 2003); may lower risk of mortality even after accounting for the effects of health, class, and social involvement (Musick, Herzog, and House, 1999); can contribute to better cognitive functioning (Hinterlong and Williamson, 2007); reduces mortality as much as physical fitness activities (Glass et al. 1999); and enables individuals to develop or reinforce knowledge and skills (Hinterlong and Williamson, 2007). Other studies have demonstrated a reduction in social isolation among more vulnerable community members, which may prevent or delay the need for those individuals to receive formal, paid services (Barker, 2002; Hinterlong, 2002).

Nonetheless, older adults of lower socio-economic status benefit more than those who are traditionally found in volunteer roles (Morrow-Howell, Hong and Tang, 2009); which suggests that service programs should aim to be inclusive of individuals of a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds.

2. Demonstrating the impact on the recipient.

Another brief authored by CSD, “Experience Corps: Effects on student reading (Morrow-Howell, McCrary, Lee, et al., 2009), demonstrates the significant and substantive impact older adult volunteers have on the reading abilities of public elementary school children.

In fact, there is a growing body of literature that suggests involving older adults in education has positive effects on children’s learning outcomes (Rebok et al., 2004) and attitudes toward aging (Blieszner and Artale, 2001). Other studies have documented that a positive relationship between older adult volunteers and students results in improvements in the students’ school attendance, more positive attitudes toward school, and reduction in substance use among students (Rogers and Taylor, 1997).

3. Demonstrating the impact on family and friends.

I know of no study that has examined the benefits of volunteering to family and friends. We are currently examining an instrument to measure the benefits on family and friends (“BFF scale: Benefits to Family and Friends Scale”) which measures the impact of financial and informational resources, relationships with family and friends, and family and friends becoming involved in volunteer roles. The CSD Brief, “Benefits of volunteering” (Morrow-Howell, McCrary, Gonzales, et al., 2008a), discusses these benefits.

4. Demonstrating the impact on society.

Johnson and Schaner (2005) have offered skilled analyses on ways to measure the economic value of older Americans’ unpaid work. For example, they note that in 2002, those aged 55 and over contributed \$63 billion through formal and informal volunteering, and nearly \$100 billion in care for family members. Putnam (2007) offers a comprehensive assessment tool to measure the civic health of communities.

In sum. In order to demonstrate the impact of service, the studies above offer a wide range of conceptual areas to investigate, scientific tools to use for such evaluations, and methodological suggestions. Moreover, evaluations can benefit by having an advisory board for research that includes both doctoral students and seasoned researchers as members. In addition, evaluation grants could be offered on a competitive basis to doctoral students, which in turn will help foster academic rigor for generations of researchers to come.

Question: As we move to more standardized performance measures, how do we preserve the diversity of programs and localized nature of solutions?

It is important that the scientific evaluation team reviews the literature of standardized performance measures and uses culturally appropriate instruments in particular settings. Failure to do this may lead to false findings, frustrated program staff, and disgruntled volunteers. Moreover, the evaluation team can work *with* their community partner in creating evaluation tools that will measure outcomes appropriately.

It is unclear if a few measures can be applied to all programs of CNCS. Certainly the instruments we have used with Experience Corps (both standardized and self-report measures) appear to have a high utility in a variety of different contexts, but we would have to engage in dialogue with each of the CNCS programs to see if these instruments would be useful in particular contexts.

Part II. Expanding Opportunities to Serve

Older adults and baby boomers in particular are equipped with a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience to contribute to our communities. Given the sheer numbers of baby boomers—78 million—their talent, idealism, and socio-political awareness can play a pivotal role in promoting political advocacy, creating intergenerational programs, and ensuring that local social service delivery programs are inclusive and supportive of all individuals.

Preparing institutions and being inclusive of all. One theme consistently heard in several studies is that older adults become frustrated with the non-profit sector’s failure to develop meaningful roles for volunteers (Gonyea & Googins, 2007). Focus group participants often speak of their frustration with being asked to stuff envelopes rather than use their expertise and skills (Gonyea & Googins, 2007). Thus, the non-profit organizations that are going to leverage these volunteers must demonstrate that their programs will maximize the involvement of these talent-rich and highly motivated volunteers with meaningful roles and on-going support.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that institutional facilitators, i.e. access to information, flexibility in task assignment (choice), ability to set schedule, on-going training and support, physical accommodation, verbal appreciation, transportation, and stipends are important to ensuring recruitment of diverse populations, retention of those volunteers, and effectiveness of the program (McBride, 2007; Nagchoudhuri, McBride, Thirupathy, Morrow-Howell, & Tang, 2007; Tang, Morrow-Howell, Hong, 2008). The CSD brief, “Experience Corps: Stipends” (Morrow-Howell, McCrary, Gonzales, et al., 2008b), demonstrates that stipends provide powerful leverage to achieve diversity, promote high levels of time commitment, and maximize benefits.

Conclusion

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act is a policy lever that will instill civic engagement for millions of Americans for years to come. However, this robust policy should be matched with rigorous evaluations that demonstrate its impact and value. Moreover, the civic participation should be inclusive of a wide range of individuals—people of all ages, ethnicities, and socio-economic statuses.

This testimony has primarily focused on volunteerism among older adults. However, I can offer just as many references of employment and older adults as it relates to Encore Fellows—instruments and methodologies to measure its impact of benefits, barriers, and institutional facilitators.

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