



Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Written Comments for the Serve America Act
Listening Session

Jennifer C. Greenfield
Center for Social Development
Washington University in St. Louis

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Campus Box 1196 One Brookings Drive St. Louis, MO 63130-9906 • (314) 935.7433 • csd.wustl.edu



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Introduction

This testimony offers recommendations on the implementation and assessment of new programs aimed at recruiting older adults into national and community service. These new programs will be created under the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, a piece of national and community service legislation that was signed into law by President Obama on April 21, 2009. Testimony was offered at a Listening Session, convened by the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Corporation requested input in response to specific questions, grouped into five broad categories: Expanding Opportunities to Serve, Combining Assets for Greater Impact, Demonstrating Impact, Spurring Innovation and Supporting the Nonprofit Sector (New Initiatives), and Achieving Growth through Simpler Grantmaking. This testimony responds to several of the questions posed by the Corporation.

Expanding Opportunities to Serve

How can the Corporation for National and Community Service and its partners attract people of all ages to serve?

1. **Use targeted and tailored marketing.** Older adults pursue service opportunities for different reasons than younger adults. These have been well documented in the literature (see Morrow-Howell, 2006). Recognizing that leaving a meaningful legacy and giving back to the community are strong motivators for older adults, recruitment strategies need to be tailored for specific age cohorts.
2. **Be sensitive to the changing economic climate.** During this economic downturn, many recent retirees and laid-off older workers are seeking service opportunities as a bridge to work. For them, the service opportunities are a chance to get trained in new skill sets, and/or to explore meaningful second careers. Highlighting these benefits of service would aid in recruitment, and appropriate service-related training would aid in retention (see <http://encore.org/fellowships> for specific examples of messaging that works to recruit Encore Fellows¹).

Should the five “Service Corps” programs be focus areas within AmeriCorps or separate programs?

1. **Maintain the integrity of AmeriCorps.** It may dilute recruitment efforts too much to run simultaneous campaigns for five different programs. However, the AmeriCorps brand should be

¹ The Encore Fellows program, piloted by Civic Ventures in California, will be expanded to engage 10 Fellows per state in 2010, with the number to increase as funding becomes available. This program provides a year of stipended training in nonprofit management and social entrepreneurship for individuals over age 55 who wish to transition from jobs in the private sector to leadership positions within nonprofit or public-sector organizations. See <http://www.encore.org/fellowships> for a description of the pilot program, which was used as a model for the Fellowships created in the Serve America Act.

retooled. The program needs to project an image of being inclusive of all ages and of offering a dynamic range of service opportunities. Running one program will also allow offices to conduct intake assessments with new volunteers to help determine skill levels and interests (see VolunteerMatch.org for an excellent model).

Spurring Innovation and Supporting the Nonprofit Sector (New Initiatives)

How should the Serve America Fellows and Encore Fellows programs be implemented?

1. **Focus on inclusion.** Although this program will be very attractive to those with high levels of education and income, it would also be an ideal opportunity to engage new leaders. For instance, blue collar and service-sector workers who have risen into leadership positions with their companies, but who may not have formal, higher education training, may be ideal candidates for Fellow positions. Additionally, special effort should be made to recruit women and people of color, who have historically been underrepresented in corporate leadership (McBride, 2006).
2. **Use innovative recruitment strategies.** At Washington University's Health Communication Research Lab (<http://hcrl.wustl.edu/>), researchers have investigated innovative media strategies and outreach techniques to help spread the word about mammograms and other life-saving health procedures (Eddens, 2007; Kreuter, 2007). We are currently exploring ways to adapt these proven techniques to help nonprofits recruit older adult volunteers from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. I highly recommend exploring innovative recruitment strategies for the Fellows and Senior Scholarship programs in order to ensure inclusivity and diversity among participants.
3. **Be sensitive to language.** At the recent National Forum on Civic Engagement, hosted by the American Society on Aging on March 16, 2009 (see <http://www.asaging.org/asav2/civicing/index.cfm>), one of the central themes that emerged was that different racial and ethnic communities talk about service in different ways. What may be "volunteering" to one group is just "doing what you do" or "giving back" to another. In many Asian communities in the US, for instance, service is a way of life, but takes place most often in the form of helping family and friends. Transitioning members of these communities into formal volunteering roles will require sensitivity to language and norms. This is best accomplished by forming an Advisory Board for Outreach to include members of diverse populations within the US.
4. **Set benchmarks for State Commissions to follow with regard to inclusion.** Although State recruitment and retention strategies will differ, standards should be established nation-wide for recruitment and retention of underrepresented groups.
5. **Focus on intergenerational partnerships.** Older adults can serve as mentors to both youths and younger adults, while younger cohorts can help older volunteers to learn new skills, especially related to technology. The Fellows programs should leverage the strengths of participants of all ages and foster partnerships rather than unidirectional exchanges of knowledge (see Marcia Pitt-Catsouphes' Sloan Center on Aging and Work at Boston College at <http://agingandwork.bc.edu> for effective models that work).

Demonstrating Impact

How can the Corporation for National and Community Service better demonstrate the impact of service?

1. **Use the national evaluation of Experience Corps as a model for evaluation.** The evaluation of Experience Corps was conducted across multiple sites around the country by the Center for Social Development (CSD) at Washington University's Brown School. The evaluation was developed through a partnership between local agencies and a central research team. Briefs about this project are available at <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Lists/Projects/DispForm2.aspx?ID=179>.
2. **Use both self-report and standardized measures.** The Experience Corps research team used a combination of standardized and self-report measures to capture the impacts of the tutoring program. Benefits were experienced by the older adult volunteers, the children they worked with, and the family and friends of participants. Using self-report measures in addition to objective, standardized measures was important, because *perception* of benefit was a significant predictor of volunteer retention (Morrow-Howell, Hong, & Tang, 2009).
3. **Establish the measures prior to program implementation,** and use longitudinal data to help capture data about benefits to participants. Be sure that the measures are customized for older adults, who may not experience the same outcomes as younger volunteers in terms of health, etc. Be sure to capture data from participants prior to service as well as at regular points during the volunteer's tenure.
4. **Develop measures for community-level and societal-level benefits.** For instance, the work at CSD has shown that family and friends of volunteers tend to gain valuable information and skills from the volunteer and tend to become interested in volunteering as well. Further, older adult volunteers may be more likely to use less health care (because they are staying active) and less mental health care (because volunteering is associated with better mental health). Additionally, Fellows¹ who train to re-enter the workforce in the nonprofit sector may draw on Social Security later than those who choose to retire, which provides a measurable benefit to society through Social Security savings (Morrow-Howell, 2001).
5. **Track the use of Education Credit transfers by older adult volunteers.** Collect data on who uses the credits (sociodemographic data as well as relationship to volunteer), how the credit was used, and whether the credit had an impact on the student's decision to pursue higher education.
6. **Establish an Advisory Board for Research.** An advisory board could help design outcome measures early on in the planning process. Include both doctoral students and seasoned researchers on this Board.
7. **Implement a competitive grant process for researchers who wish to evaluate outcomes.** Earmark a number of grants specifically for doctoral students to help spur interest in research about civic engagement and cultivate the next generation of experts in the field. Alternatively (or additionally), consider implementing a post-doctoral Fellows program at the Corporation for National and Community Service. These post-docs could help develop measures, conduct analysis, and evaluate the quality of evidence being submitted by partner agencies.

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