

Steering Committee

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On behalf of the Campaign for Youth, the Steering Committee wants to thank the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) for the opportunity to offer comments on the historic *Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act*. With proper funding, the Serve America Act will create thousands of additional opportunities for Americans, especially young Americans, to give back and contribute to the progress and betterment of our nation. The Serve America Act also offers new and innovative ways to consider the idea of Service as a platform for making public and private investments in education, workforce, training and community development.

There are several key components of *Serve America* that will allow states, localities and community-based organizations to leverage federal resources, coalescing disparate community-building strategies across sectors for maximum impact. From the vigorous expansion of service opportunities to the clear commitment and focus on youth, especially those in disadvantaged situations, *Serve America* can support redefining the use of service in establishing career pathways, promoting training and skills development, and spurring innovation in education.

We hope that our comments will strengthen the Corporation's ability to effectively implement service programs that use existing community resources and expertise wisely to support disadvantaged and disconnected youth. Thank you for your consideration of our recommendations. If you have any questions or need further information, please contact Kisha Bird at Campaign for Youth, 202-906-8020 or kbird@clasp.org.

Addressing the Youth Challenge

Every nine seconds in America a student becomes a dropout.ⁱ One in three youth—and more than 50 percent of minority youth and youth in high poverty urban and rural communities—who start high school will not graduate four years later.ⁱⁱ With employment for youth at the lowest level in 60 years and nearly 6.2 million high school dropouts (ages 16-24), we face a tremendous national challenge. While the escalating high school dropout crisis has received increased media attention and policy interest, there has been little public debate and fewer resources concentrated on the critical importance of dropout recovery which is

essential to the economic well-being and quality of life in our communities.ⁱⁱⁱ¹ A growing body of research supports “giving young people opportunities to become engaged in civic activities increases the likelihood that they will become healthy, active citizens”.^{iv} As CNCS implements the *Serve America* Act, it is vital that it place emphasis on strategies and programming that support dropout recovery.

Recommendations

1. Expanding Opportunities to Serve

The implementation of *Serve America* should maximize opportunities for disconnected youth to serve in AmeriCorps. It is important to recognize that service has long been a critical component of high quality youth development programming, teaching critical leadership and job skills, especially for low-income youth.^v However, there are limited opportunities for disadvantaged youth to develop these skills. When given the opportunity, these young people excel. In a comprehensive study of national youth Corps programs, researchers found that young people who join a Corps experience significant employment and earnings gains and reduction in arrests and out-of-wedlock pregnancies.^{vi}

Thus, we recommend, CNCS in the RFP process:

- Prioritize disadvantaged youth, as defined by the legislation, for corpsmember recruitment and retention across all the new Service Corps outlined in the Act (education, healthy futures, clean energy, veterans and economic opportunity). Currently, these youth are primarily referenced as a recruitment priority in the Clean Energy corps.

Promising Approaches in Youth Development

Hundreds of successful models exist that provide youth with high quality work experience, education, and the opportunity to engage in service, including service and conservation corps, YouthBuild and multiple-WIA funded programs^{vii2}. These models have, in many instances, leveraged resources through AmeriCorps and the community-based Learn and Serve America program to provide disadvantaged and disconnected youth with education and career pathways—while engaging youth in community service and youth-led civic projects that strengthen their communities, enrich classroom instruction and learning.

¹ High school dropouts earn less than 6 percent of all dollars earned in the U.S. In the nation’s 50 largest cities, high school dropouts make \$10,000 less per year than high school graduates, and \$34,000 less than college graduates. Further, only one-third (37 percent) of high school dropouts nationwide are steadily employed, and they are more than twice as likely to live in poverty.

² In *Whatever it Takes*, authors identify twelve communities across the nation that are successfully reengaging out-of-school youth. These efforts are “comprehensive, youth-centered, flexible, and intentional” and integrate disparate resources into cross-systems approaches.

These models combine the following elements of effective program delivery practice^{viii}:

- Caring Adult Support
- Well Developed Education Component
- Rich Workplace Connections
- Youth Involvement/ Civic Engagement
- Connections to Systems and resources

Therefore we recommend:

- CNCS in its guidance and resources for Learn and Serve America and AmeriCorps grantees build on these best practices and utilize, when possible, the technical expertise of national and local intermediaries that have demonstrated track record and history of working with disadvantaged youth.

2. Combining Assets for Greater Impact

CNCS, its national, state, and local partners and grantees can play a strategic role in supporting local youth service delivery infrastructure. Funding through *Serve America*, if braided and blended with other youth-directed public/private streams can support the development of catalytic models that create comprehensive systems and community-wide programming versus stand-alone program models with limited reach and impact.

Therefore, we recommend, CNCS:

- Require state commissions to ensure that their portfolios are consistent with state plans (if any) for youth, rather than individual applicants.
- Recognize the importance of collaborations beyond the secondary education system and build on the work of local Youth Councils or other appropriately constituted entities – to include members of workforce, business, higher education, and other youth-serving systems (i.e. child welfare, justice), especially in proposals for serving out-of-school youth in Youth Engagement Zones authorized the “INNOVATIVE AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICE-LEARNING PROGRAMS AND RESEARCH” Title.
- Encourage state commissions to make grants to existing public/private partnerships that have developed strategic, long-term relationships with the private sector in support of internships, pre-apprenticeships/ apprenticeships, and subsidized employment.

3. Spurring Innovation and Supporting the Nonprofit Sector (New Initiatives)

The demand for programs that enroll disconnected youth to reconnect them far exceeds their supply. Resources made available through Learn and Serve America, AmeriCorps, as well as new service initiatives must seek to bring programming at scale and build on the current talent and infrastructure to sufficiently to meet the needs of youth and communities. The CNCS can support on the ground practice by devoting resources to both systems building and program delivery.

We therefore recommend the following, specifically within Subtitle H (*Investment for Quality and Innovation*):

Social Innovation Fund:

- Eligible grantees should include national intermediary organizations that make grants, as well as, local non-profit organizations and philanthropic institutions, such as community foundations.
- Require applicants to (a) demonstrate in-depth knowledge of state and local issues in which their grantmaking would seek to expand “effective initiatives and provide seed funding for experimental initiatives”; and (b) make strategic investments in coordination with other local planning efforts, in an attempt more effectively “leverage federal investments” and maximize programmatic impact.

Nonprofit Capacity Building Program

- In addition to providing technical assistance on core organizational development topics, such as board development, grantwriting, etc., this program must also support professional and best practice development for staff and volunteers. Specifically, it should direct resources to strengthen the youth development workforce by increasing professional development opportunities, training, and professional recognition of those that are working with/and on behalf of youth.

ⁱC.A. Lehr et al., *Essential tools: Increasing rates of school completion*, National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004, <http://www.ncset.org/publications/essentialtools/dropout/dropout.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Gary Orfield, Daniel Losen, Joanna Wald, and Christopher Swanson, *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youths are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*, The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2004, 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ C Swanson, *Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap: Educational and Economic Conditions in America's Largest Cities*, Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2009, http://www.edweek.org/media/cities_in_crisis_2009.pdf.

^{iv} Erik Michelsen, Jonathan F. Zaff, Ph.D., and Elizabeth C. Hair, Ph.D., Civic Engagement Programs and Youth Development: A Synthesis, Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Child Trends, 2002

http://www.childtrends.org/what_works/clarkwww/civic/civicrpt.pdf

^v The Corps Network Web site, “History”,

http://www.nascc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=85&Itemid=65

^{vi} JoAnn Jastrzab, John Blomquist, Julie Masker, and Larry Orr, *Youth Corps: Promising Strategies for Young People and Their Communities*, Abt Associates, Inc. Studies in Workforce Development and Income Security, 1997, 16-21, <http://www.nascc.org/images/pdfs/abtreport.pdf>

^{vii} Martin, N., & Halperin, S. (2006). *Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum

^{viii} Presentation by Linda Harris, CLASP, United States / European Union Roundtable, January 28 -29, 2008, <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/0538.pdf>

ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN FOR YOUTH

Housed at the Center for Law and Social Policy, the Campaign for Youth is an alliance of organizations who are concerned about the persistence, yet seeming invisibility, of the challenges confronting more than 5 million young people in this nation who are disconnected from education, employment and opportunity. Established in 2002 by the leadership of national youth serving organizations, the Campaign for Youth’s mission is to build a united voice for disadvantaged and disconnected youth in this nation, and to build a constituency for action. For more information on the Campaign for Youth and the partnering organizations, please visit www.campaignforyouth.org or email kbird@clasp.org.