

STATEMENT OF
ALAN SOLOMONT, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD
CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS
ON THE NEXT GENERATION OF NATIONAL SERVICE

MARCH 10, 2009

Chairwoman, Ranking Member Enzi, and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon. Thank you for this opportunity to testify, and for this Committee's longstanding bipartisan support for national service. I especially thank you, Chairwoman – the Godmother of National Service -- for your passionate advocacy and strong oversight over the past sixteen years.

We are grateful that you have put National Service on the Committee's agenda so early in the 111th Congress. I appear before you today as the newly elected Chairman of the Board of the Directors of the Corporation for National and Community Service. I was appointed to the Board by President Clinton in 2000, reappointed by President Bush in 2007, and elected as Chairman last month, stepping into the shoes of my good friend Stephen Goldsmith, who you will hear from shortly.

Having served on the Board for this long, I know that there have been times when you had concerns about the Corporation's management and leadership. I want you to know that we heard you then, and we hear you now. We remain committed to transparent and rigorous management of the resources with which we've been entrusted. Sound management and accountability remain the top focus of our bipartisan Board and senior staff.

I want to acknowledge one member of the Committee who is not here and who happens to be my Senator. I would not be here if it weren't for Senator Kennedy - who sponsored the original national service legislation, and who – along with you and Senator Hatch – is driving the next generation of service envisioned in the Serve America Act.

Today's hearing comes at a pivotal moment for national and community service:

- The economic crisis is causing hardship for millions of Americans, and no one sector of society can pull us out of it.
- We have a President who understands the power of citizen action and who has pledged to make service a central cause of his presidency.
- We have bipartisan support for a dramatic expansion in service.
- And we have a new generation – known as the Millennial Generation - that is looking to participate in something larger than themselves by serving their communities and their country.

To me, national service is all about engaging Americans in solving community problems. That idea is as old as America, but it is made new with each generation. And as each generation realizes the impact of service, it also learns that service is transformative. I know because it was for me.

After graduating from college in the 1970's, I moved to Lowell, Massachusetts to be a community organizer. Lowell was the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, but by the 1970's what was once a prosperous mill town was down on its luck. Our organizing project helped tenants avoid eviction and homeowners protect their neighborhoods. We worked with businesses and churches and labor unions to save jobs. I worked alongside then City Councilor Paul Tsongas, and a young candidate for Congress, John Kerry.

The organizing we did made a real difference in helping Lowellians cope with the economic crisis. But it also had a profound impact on my life. I went on to a career in business, but everything I've done since then has been informed by what I learned in Lowell – especially my belief that things can change for the better if we work together.

This ethic of service affects every generation. And the emerging generation of young people is especially open to it. I believe that civilian service has the potential to do in part for this generation what military service did for the "Greatest Generation". Through their military service, the men and women of the Greatest Generation were exposed to the great diversity of America. Their service bound them together and fueled their patriotism – making them better citizens and making America a stronger nation.

Today, we are at an inflection point, the beginning of a new era of responsibility and citizen engagement. We saw this in the 2008 presidential campaign, when millions of Americans from both political parties became part of the process for the first time. We saw this on Martin Luther King Day when Americans across the nation honored Dr. King's legacy through service. And we're seeing it in volunteer centers and community organizations, as Americans respond to the economic downturn and to the President's call to service. From Millennials to Baby Boomers to the Greatest Generation, Americans want to be part of helping their country recover, prosper, and lead.

The Serve America Act, first introduced in the 110th Congress and reintroduced as S. 277 on January 16 by Senators Ted Kennedy and Orrin Hatch, will grow national service to meet these challenges. It will invest in and expand the civic and volunteer infrastructure to support this growth. The bill sets the Corporation on a path to enlisting 250,000 members and it strengthens service opportunities for people of all ages.

The March 6, 2009, letter from the Office of Management and Budget lays out the Administration's priorities for national service. I would like to highlight a few provisions discussed in the letter here.

The Administration supports simplifying funding streams, management structures, and application and reporting processes. Part of this simplification is expanded authority to use fixed-amount grants that simplify reporting requirements, while ensuring more robust performance accountability and more uniform collection of impact data.

Any discussion about the "next generation of service" is also an opportunity to talk about innovation. The problems our nation faces can't be solved by government alone. They require that all hands be on deck. Though the Corporation's role has traditionally been to choose the best programs and ensure accountability, it also can play a role in incenting and investing in new ideas. The Serve America Act provides for that through the Community Solutions Fund, which searches for and tests new ideas, leverages private support, and expands successful programs to scale.

The Administration is pleased that the Serve America Act also seeks to improve service-learning opportunities and new service opportunities for baby boomers and older Americans.

As someone who has worked with seniors my entire professional life, and who has been the Board's advocate for Senior Corps, I appreciate the value and impact of Senior Corps. Older Americans are a precious resource who bring a lifetime of skills and experience to their volunteer work.

The programs of the Senior Corps, some of which began in the 1960's in conjunction with the War on Poverty, have done a terrific job. I know that because I have worked closely with Retired Senior Volunteer Programs in my business. But as we anticipate the coming wave of aging Baby Boomers, now is the time to modernize these programs for the 21st century. The Administration has made a commitment to expand these programs, but we cannot provide seniors with the service opportunities they deserve without introducing competition, greater accountability, and innovation into the Senior Corps programs.

Finally, the Administration would like to see an increase in the maximum amount of the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award – named for a dear friend who was one of the architects of national service -- which has not been adjusted since the program's inception in 1993.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my own experience and some of the Administration's priorities on national service. I appreciate your support, and I truly believe that we have the potential not only to transform lives and communities but to change our country. I look forward to working with you and to answering your questions.