

Testimony before House Education and Labor Committee  
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am here today as the President of Civic Ventures, a think tank and program incubator dedicated to helping America gain the greatest return on the experience of our citizens. I am also CEO of Experience Corps, one of Civic Ventures' signature programs, which engages Americans over 55 in intense tutoring and mentoring in public schools in 21 communities around the country.

For 10 years now, we've seen the impact of thousands of Experience Corps members on children struggling to learn to read. Rigorous independent research has proven that Experience Corps boosts student academic performance and reduces negative behavior in school, helps schools and youth-serving organizations become more successful, and enhances the well-being of Experience Corps members. Notably, 70 percent of Experience Corps members come from the immediate community of the schools in which they serve, so beyond bolstering the students and the schools, these members are building stronger communities in some of our most needy neighborhoods.

This hearing takes place at an opportune moment, as 78 million baby boomers, the oldest of whom are just now crossing into their 60s, begin to think about what's next. As children leave home and midlife careers run their course, most in their 50s and 60s today are not, contrary to popular images, thinking about full-time leisure. There is abundant evidence that boomers today are thinking about meaning, purpose, community service, and jobs that benefit the greater good. They are thinking about the world their children will inherit and how they can make it a better place. It is an opportune moment – and we have an extraordinary opportunity. **With federal support, we can transform the aging of the baby boom generation from a crisis into an opportunity. Working together, we can engage millions of talented, experienced Americans as a new and powerful workforce for social good, mobilized to solve problems and strengthen communities.**

Backdrop

The aging of America is likely to be the biggest demographic story of our times. Though the statistics about the changes in the make-up of the American population have become familiar, they are nonetheless breathtaking. The largest generation ever to pass through its 40s and 50s is now moving into its 60s. In five years, 20 percent of the population will be over 60. This will bring profound changes to schools and universities, to health care and housing, to transportation and the workplace, to virtually every institution in our lives.

We are already having a debate about some of the consequences of an aging America. But so far that debate has been almost exclusively focused on the costs an aging society will add to programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. The importance of these issues is undeniable, both for the financial and health security of individuals and for the fiscal solvency of the country. But the changes that the demographic wave will bring to the country go much deeper than these fiscal realities.

A debate that focuses only on the burdens of aging will bring costs of its own – negativity, brewing generational resentments, an unhealthy sense of separation and isolation. We need to balance the scales by also exploring and debating proposals to capture the energy, idealism, and talent of millions of Americans who want to make a major contribution to the public good.

But this goes much further and deeper than balancing the political scales; it goes to the question of how we will meet our nation’s biggest challenges. We all want to see more children succeed, which means better education, better afterschool programs, more mentors. We all want to see a healthier society, which means more health professionals, particularly nurses and aides. We all rely on the nonprofit sector to meet community needs, but the nonprofit sector is facing an enormous workforce shortage over the next decade. Who will step in and do the work?

The greatest source of new workers in these vital areas may, in fact, be those who have finished their midlife careers but who still want to work and need to work, those who are searching for both individual and social renewal. That’s why in a nation filled with such profound needs in education, health care, and the social sector, and at a time when the nation yearns for a greater feeling of connectedness and community, to look away from the potential of engaging older adults would be as irresponsible as ignoring the costs of an aging society.

So how do we move millions of boomers into the social sector? In the past, those who had finished working became volunteers. We have a proud history and tradition of volunteer service by older Americans, and we need to continue to engage people in the second half of life as volunteers. But as we look ahead, we can expect that many more people are going to stay in the workforce, or return to the workforce. Survey after survey shows that 75% percent of people expect to “work in retirement.”

What jobs will they do? In 2005, the MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures *New Face of Work Survey* found that aging boomers have a strong desire to launch a new chapter in their working lives that involves significant social contribution. Individuals over 50, especially adults between 50 and 55, showed a surprisingly high level of interest in making shifts from their intense midlife careers to new pursuits that improve life in their communities.

This desire for meaning in the post-midlife years has the potential to meet widening human resource shortages in sectors like education, health care, and social services.

However, only 12% of these 50+ adults think it will be very easy to find jobs where they can make a difference. Therein lies the opportunity – and the challenge. Volunteer service can open the door to meaning and contribution. It can provide training. And it can be a pathway to paid employment in service of the greater good.

### Principles for new policies

A one-size-fits-all federal program for older Americans is unlikely to be affordable or to meet the diverse needs of members of the baby boom generation. But we do need new policies to spark innovations and capture the opportunity of an aging society. So I'd like to suggest several key principles to guide the development of new policies.

*Support innovation and experimentation* by individuals and organizations. We simply do not know yet what type of programs will attract members of the baby boom generation into significant service and volunteering. We also do not know what type of approach will work best for the organizations and institutions that engage volunteers. Under the circumstances, a period of intense innovation and experimentation is most appropriate. Even with plenty of innovation and experimentation, it is not realistic to believe that any single program will appeal to everyone or to every organization. If nothing else, the boomer generation is known for wanting choice, so policies must avoid the search for the silver bullet program to engage everyone and, instead, work to develop a menu of appealing opportunities for individuals and organizations to connect.

*Build on what we've learned.* While seeking innovation, should not not leave behind what we have learned through the successes of existing programs. For instance, through Experience Corps, we have learned much about the importance of producing measurable outcomes for students and Experience Corps members, we have seen the value of a team-based approach, we know that continuous learning and leadership opportunities are vital. We know that when you have all of these components, you produce real results in the community and real satisfaction for participants.

*Make it possible for new organizations to come into existence and for existing organizations to innovate.* One of the successes of AmeriCorps is that it helped brilliant new organizations like CityYear, Public Allies, Citizen Schools, Teach for America and others to come into existence and flourish. It also brought new energy and resources to more established organizations like the Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and the American Red Cross. An effort to engage people who finished their midlife careers in service and volunteering should have the same type of impact – to fire the imagination of social entrepreneurs who will start new programs and organizations, and to reinvigorate existing organizations that will be looking for new talent.

*Attract the broadest possible range of participants.* Like AmeriCorps, new civic engagement endeavors should be open to all participants – no limitations based on income, education, health status, or ability. The focus should be meeting community needs and solving community problems – not on keeping older adults engaged.

*Look for pathways to work, not just service opportunities.* One of the great successes of AmeriCorps is that it has become a training ground for new staff and leaders in non-profit organizations. The same is true for Experience Corps members. It's not unusual for people to start as Experience Corps members – tutoring and mentoring young people – and then to move into staff jobs running the program. Service opportunities for people who have finished their midlife careers should include the possibility of opening doors to paying jobs.

*Draw champions and support from leaders in both parties.* In a time of division, people have a hunger for ideas that bring people together to solve problems. Civic engagement has that potential. Each recent President (Bush, Clinton, and Bush) has advanced a major civic engagement agenda (Points of Light, AmeriCorps, and USA Freedom Corps). As significant, each has actively supported the civic engagement proposals of the others. A major proposal focused on older adult civic engagement should seek to extend that bipartisan enthusiasm.

Two recent developments are notable and heartening.

Last fall a bipartisan group of House and Senate members came together to reauthorize the Older Americans Act. For the first time, that legislation contained significant civic engagement language. We look forward to working with the Administration on Aging and this Committee to see that language lead to new action and innovation.

And the budget the President sent to Congress earlier this month contained a proposal for a Boomer Corps, which would develop a new menu of flexible opportunities for individuals to choose one time, periodic, or intensive volunteer activities, an idea and innovation that holds real promise.

#### Four Ideas

With needs of society and the principles outlined above in mind, here are the broad outlines of four policy proposals to significantly advance the civic engagement options for people who have finished their midlife work and who want a chance to make a major commitment and contribution to the public good.

*Experience Fellows.* People who are seeking to make a major commitment to service and good work often suffer from a lack of access to and knowledge of opportunities. People are not certain what they want, and organizations are not certain that they can make a long-term commitment. For many young people, we have eased this transition with internships and fellowships that provide an entry point and structure for gaining experience, while also giving organizations an inexpensive labor pool and a concrete way to engage young people.

An Experience Fellows program would create a similar pathway and structure for people who have completed their midlife careers but seek a way to enter into a period of work for the public good. The program would be modeled on the best aspects of the White

House Fellows Program, VISTA, and the Coro Fellows. People would apply for and be accepted as Experience Fellows. Each Fellow selected would receive a voucher that enables him or her to go to any nonprofit organization or public agency and seek an assignment. The voucher would cover a stipend for the Experience Fellow and also provide funds to support training for the organization where the Fellow works. Organizations would compete to attract Experienced Fellows.

The Experience Fellows program would start as a federal pilot program, moving up to as many as 1,000 Fellows per year. However, the fellowship model could be replicated on a state and local level, and could even be replicated by private sector employers who want to help employees nearing retirement transition to nonprofit or public sector jobs.

*Reverse GI Bill.* The GI Bill established the basic concept of rewarding service with educational opportunity. It was one of the great successes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For people who have finished their midlife careers and who want to move into work or service in the nonprofit sector, a reverse GI Bill can provide similar benefits.

Many people who want to move into high-need professions like education or health care will need a period of training or education. In some instances, people might need to gain a credential or certificate. The student loan approach may not be practical for people in their middle years. The Reverse GI Bill, modeled on the ROTC and Public Health Service Corps approach, would support midlife individuals in getting education and training; the people would then repay the educational support by a period of service in a high-need profession. One year of education or training would be repaid through two or three years of service or work.

*Expand Troops to Teachers.* The federal government already has a highly successful transition program called Troops to Teachers. In the past dozen years, some 9,500 veterans have received support to gain teaching credentials and then been recruited into teaching and administration jobs in high-need areas. The program has been a great success, winning plaudits from principals, educators, and independent evaluators.

Recognizing the success of Troops to Teachers, Congress directed a study of a proposal to create a Troops to Nurse Teachers program that would recruit Army and Navy medical corpsmen and women to become nurse educators, a profession that is suffering from a severe workforce shortage.

Further extensions of the Troops to Teachers idea also hold promise. Why not extend the idea beyond military personnel? Other federal employees, for example, are eligible for an excellent retirement program after 30 years of federal service, allowing many to retire from the federal government in their mid-50s with many productive years left. They could benefit from a program that allowed them to transition to education or other high need fields.

*Organizational Innovation Fund.* In the fall of 2005 the Corporation for National & Community Service put out a call for proposals for existing organizations to make special

efforts to engage baby boomers. The Corporation required a stiff (2 to 1) private matching requirement to apply for these funds. After Hurricane Katrina, the Corporation narrowed the call for proposals to efforts responding to the disaster in the Gulf region. Even with these limitations and the challenging match requirement, the Corporation received a large number of proposals.

The Corporation's experience with this one-time competition demonstrates that a comparatively small investment of federal dollars can stimulate nonprofit organizations to adopt new practices to engage older Americans in service and volunteering. Building on the Corporation's experience, an Organizational Innovation Fund would provide federal grants to nonprofit organizations that adopt new and creative ways to engage older Americans in service and volunteer work. The focus of the grants would be to create new opportunities for high-commitment, high-impact service.

Through the operation of a matching grant requirement, these funds would bring additional private investment in older adult civic engagement. And by lodging the response in nonprofit organizations (either existing organizations or potentially new organizations), the fund provides the greatest chance for creative, risk-taking responses from the non-governmental sector.

**In closing, I'd hope we can work together to act on the tremendous potential of people who have finished their midlife careers to be the workforce for good in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.** With federal support and the mobilization of millions of boomers, we can improve education, healthcare, and the social sector. Service and volunteering cannot be the whole answer, but well-designed programs and investments can lay a foundation for the big, bold changes that are needed to meet new societal needs and the needs and desires of members of the baby boom generation. Now is the time to start.