Written Testimony Submitted to RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America

Field Hearing on December 10, 2008: “Workplace Wellness Initiatives, Occupational Health and Safety and Conditions and Benefits of Work”

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Thank you for the opportunity to present Civic Ventures’ Experience Corps program to the Commission as an example of an effort that helps older adults stay healthy through regular “paid and unpaid work” in public schools and youth-serving organizations. In addition to the overwhelming body of evidence showing that the program produces positive health effects for older adults – several studies demonstrate that the program increases student achievement and boosts social capital in urban communities. I look forward to speaking briefly about the information presented in this short document at the hearing in Denver.

Program Description

Experience Corps is an award-winning national service program originally envisioned by civic leader John Gardner as a way of utilizing the “rich reservoir of talent, experience and commitment” of people 65+ to revitalize their communities. Gardner wrote a short concept paper outlining his idea for the Experience Corps in 1988, nearly 10 years before the program would become a reality. Now, research and practice have proven that Gardner was extraordinarily prescient about the impact that organizing older adults to give back to their communities might have. He wrote:

“We will undertake to be of assistance in a great variety of areas, working with children, the disabled, older people, volunteering in hospitals and nursing homes, tutoring, providing
home care and so on. ... We believe that this will be a great adventure—good for us physically and in every other way. If one lists the problems of older people, health would perhaps top the list, with economic problems perhaps second. After that, very high on the list is a cluster of problems: loneliness, boredom and need to be needed. We believe that our plan hits directly at that cluster. And current opinion in medical circles is that if one can deal with those problems, many of our problems of physical health will be more easily solved."

In the mid-1990s, a public-private partnership piloted the first Experience Corps projects in five cities: Minneapolis, New York, Philadelphia, Port Arthur (TX), and Portland (OR). Twelve elementary schools hosted teams of older adults who worked as tutors, mentors, and after-school activity leaders for 15 hours each week in exchange for a small stipend. Johns Hopkins University, Public/Private Ventures, and the Corporation for National and Community Service co-designed, funded, and evaluated the effort. Based on the success of this small pilot, in 1998 Public/Private Ventures launched a new nonprofit -- Civic Ventures -- to grow Experience Corps and to develop new civic roles for people aged 50+. Marc Freedman served as Civic Ventures’ President and John Gardner was a founding board member.

With continued public-private investment – including grants from the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and The Atlantic Philanthropies – Experience Corps expanded dramatically. Currently, nearly 2,000 older adults (called “Experience Corps members”) are serving 20,000 children and youth in 23 cities during and after the school day. Most work about 10 hours a week in tutoring, mentoring, classroom-based assistance, and after-school enrichment roles in exchange for a
small stipend. Some work as few as 5 hours a week or as many as 20 hours. But all are trained for their role; are assigned to a team at their service site; have work to do that is focused on reaching specific outcomes; and have opportunities both for continued learning and for community leadership. In addition, a paid staff member supervises the work of the teams at each site. These structural elements – training, teams, learning, leadership, focus on outcomes, and modest payment – contribute to both individual and community health. For example, the older adults’ physical and social activity increases; students’ classroom behavior improves, thereby improving teachers’ work environment; and schools are connected to additional community resources that range from volunteer time to donated books to free dental care for children. (Johns Hopkins University researchers published an article about the program’s design in the Journal of Urban Health in 2004: Experience Corps: Design of an Intergenerational Program to Boost Social Capital and Promote the Health of an Aging Society.

The people who benefit from Experience Corps – young and old alike – are a diverse group. Most of the older adults are women; more than half are African-American. They range in age from their late 40s to their early 90s, with an average age of 65. About 25% are lower-income. They come from all walks of life and professions; about one-third are former educators. These community members serve a group of students who are largely African-American and Latino, lower-income, and performing academically below their peers. A 2008 report from AARP, More to Give, says that "Experience Corps has succeeded in attracting a diverse group of Experienced Americans into intense service that has produced powerful results for at-risk children… while also demonstrably improving the lives of Experience Corps members."
The program continues to be funded, nationally and locally, by both public and private sources. It has been studied by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, University of Virginia, Washington University in St. Louis, Harvard University’s Saguaro Seminar, Public/Private Ventures, and Policy Studies Associates. More information about Experience Corps and its impact, including links to several research studies, is available at www.experiencecorps.org.

**Contributions to Individual and Community Health Outcomes: What’s the Evidence?**

Experience Corps is designed to benefit both individual and community health by encouraging regular, ongoing commitment from older adult participants in teams of their peers. The model has been studied extensively and has been found to have significant positive effects on older adults’ health and well-being, children’s academic performance and behavior, and school and classroom environments. We call this Experience Corps’s “triple win” -- taken together, a set of outcomes that help build social capital in urban communities.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University and Washington University in St. Louis have specifically studied the connections between Experience Corps participation and older adults’ physical, cognitive, and psychological well-being. Selected findings from these two studies include:

- In a study of Baltimore Experience Corps (EC) members, Johns Hopkins University researchers found a correlation between program participation and increased levels of physical activity\(^1\). What’s more, the older adults who are benefiting from the increased physical activity are the ones who have historically not utilized health promotion programs. EC participants who reported “low activity” at the beginning of
the study reported an average 110% increase in physical activity at follow-up, compared to a 12% increase among control-group participants.

- Johns Hopkins researchers also found that at follow-up, other indicators of well-being increased significantly: strength, people one could turn to for help, and cognitive activity.²

- A recent national study of the Experience Corps program by researchers at Washington University in St. Louis found a direct correlation between overall life improvement and EC involvement. Over 85% of participants agreed that their lives improved during one year of involvement with the program. More than three-quarters of EC program participants also said it was “somewhat true” or “very true” that they used time more productively, felt better about themselves, and increased their circle of friends because of participation in the program.³

- Two-thirds of older adults identified as lower-activity at the outset of the Washington University study sustained or increased their participation in daily activities while adding on 11 to 15 hours of service through Experience Corps. Both lower- and higher-activity older adults decreased the amount of time they spent watching TV.⁴

In short, the effects of participation in Experience Corps – many features of which mimic part-time work -- contribute to a healthier older adult population. Though none of the research to date has analyzed specific reductions in health care costs, Experience Corps does increase positive health outcomes for lower-income and lower-activity older adults in ways that potentially could decrease Medicare costs and the overall public health costs of this population group.
More information about Washington University’s study of the program’s impact for older adults can be found at:

http://gwbweb.wustl.edu/CSD/service/older_adults_and_civic_service/Experience_Corp.htm

Students, teachers, school environments, and surrounding neighborhoods benefit from Experience Corps members’ work as well. Anecdotal evidence along with both qualitative and quantitative research, show that good things happen when Experience Corps members are present in a school: for example, students’ academic performance increases, behavior improves, teachers are better able to focus their time with students most in need of support, and students are more readily connected with needed health resources like vision screening or dental care.5

In addition to formal research about the program, Experience Corps measures success through ongoing informal assessments; the number of communities, older adults, and young people who are reached each year; mentions in print and electronic media; and the stories that people tell about their experience with the program. Great stories about Experience Corps can be found at: http://www.experiencecorps.org/news/news.cfm. We can definitively say that both individuals and communities are healthier because of the program.

Our Greatest Challenges

Experience Corps has always worked in challenging urban environments. Over the last five years, it has become more difficult for community programs to partner with urban public schools. The accountability and social demands placed on these schools make it complicated for professionals to work with outside groups to support students. At the same
time, the academic and social needs that students are bringing to school make community support essential to their success.

More recently, the changing economy has made it more difficult to recruit older adults to provide intensive, sustained service multiple days each week. The rising cost of gas, groceries, and other basic needs are forcing many older adults to keep working or to return to work. The middle- and lower- income older adults who had available time can no longer make ends meet with the small monthly stipend our program can provide.

The availability of flexible, stipended service roles for older adults may also either expand or narrow depending on the legislation that governs programs like Experience Corps as well as the funds that Congress appropriates for national service in the coming years. The “Serve America” Act, introduced by Senators Kennedy and Hatch, as well as Senator Dodd’s “Encore Service” Act, may offer new opportunities. However, in today’s economy, even legislation with significant bipartisan support may fail because of more urgent competing priorities.

Broader Applications of the Experience Corps Model and Directions for Policymakers

Experience Corps’s model has been tested and studied through both experimental and more “natural” research; it’s attracted attention from media and policymakers as well as a research community; and the program has been replicated from its original five sites to multiple new settings. Therefore, we are confident that the model and its results can be applied to other service settings as well as to older adults’ paid work. What are some of the possibilities?
Experience Corps co-creator and Civic Ventures President Marc Freedman cites the program as an inspiration for his thinking about the “Encore Career” – a model for encouraging people in their 50s and 60s to pursue social-purpose work in later life. His 2007 book *Encore: Finding Work that Matters in the Second Half of Life* suggests that as 77 million Boomers approach traditional retirement age in today’s economy, many more people will want to combine continued income with personal and social significance -- as Experience Corps members are already doing. Freedman challenges us to: “Think of the possibilities if 100,000 people launched 10-year encore careers. That’s one million years of service dedicated to areas like education, poverty and the environment. What are we waiting for?”

Clearly, with just 2,000 Experience Corps members across the country focused on helping to solve important but still-limited challenged in educational settings – there’s lots of room to keep growing into new areas. Even within education, the program model could be applied to younger and older youth; focused on challenges from early literacy to dropout prevention; support learning in math and science; and much more. As John Gardner originally envisioned, Experience Corps might tackle health care or home care or housing or poverty or the environment. If “green jobs” had been invented when Gardner was alive, surely he’d have thought that his peers could make great contributions to creating more sustainable communities.

What will it take to apply Experience Corps’s lessons learned to new challenges in new settings? A new set of partners might launch new pilot projects, test the features of the model, and make adjustments to achieve greater impact in a greater number of communities.
Expansion will also require new streams of funding as well as policy changes that will enable flexible work arrangements for people in later life to have the same kinds of opportunities we give to college students and graduate students – internships, fellowships, or as one innovator has called them, “returnships” – to enable people to learn the skills that will allow them to apply their life experiences to new work in their communities, whether paid at market rates or through a modest stipend.

Programs like Experience Corps can be a destination or a pathway to new work, and evidence shows that this type of work produces positive health, well-being, and educational outcomes. So applying and extending Experience Corps’s learnings to new areas of work and service would be a worthwhile investment – one that could boost healthy outcomes for people of all ages.