

TESTIMONY OF  
David R. Edelman  
Former AmeriCorps\*NCCC member  
Merrick, New York

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTHY FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES  
*"Strengthening Communities: An Overview of Service and Volunteering in  
America"*

FEBRUARY 27, 2007

I want to thank you for inviting me to speak today and granting me the opportunity to tell you about my experience in AmeriCorps\*NCCC. When I first entered the AmeriCorps\*NCCC program in January 2005, one of our first tasks was to write a letter to ourselves addressing our aspirations for the year. Like most people on my team, my letter focused largely on the service work I hoped to partake in during the course of the program. I mentioned that I hoped to have the opportunity to provide relief during a natural disaster, build a house for a family in need, work with children in an educational setting and participate in an effort to improve the environment.

Looking back at my experience in AmeriCorps, it is accurate to say that although I had the opportunity to engage in these activities, this is not the main reason for my feeling that the program was a success. Just as important as the impact of my service work was the tremendous effect AmeriCorps\*NCCC had upon me. It helped me to recognize the incredible power inherent in a group of determined individuals and my service ultimately gave me the confidence to pursue my passions in life.

The National Civilian Community Corps experience is unique to the AmeriCorps family because it is a residential program for 18-24 year olds, which exposes you to a diverse group of people and a whole spectrum of national and community service options. Before entering the program, I only had vague ideas where my talents and interests lay. NCCC helped me realize my passion for education. Since completing the program, I have enrolled in a master's program to become a high school social studies teacher. I have made good use of my AmeriCorps educational award, which has now been converted into college tuition. I currently student teach in a twelfth grade economics class in a public school on Long Island. I strive to create course work that promotes civic responsibility and I believe my personal experiences will inspire many of my students to engage in community service and even join AmeriCorps themselves.

Although my experience in the NCCC has been life changing, the decision to accept an invitation to the program was not easy. When I applied, I was a

college graduate for a little over a year and was working at a marketing research company in New York City. At the time, the corporate world seemed like the logical next step after college. I was keenly aware that entering AmeriCorps\*NCCC would require me to step outside my comfort zone and relinquish a large amount of control over my life. I ultimately decided to leave my job and join the program out of the desire to discover a path that was more in line with my ideals and aspirations. I also believed that the program would expose me to many of the unpleasant but important hardships of life.

Growing up in a fairly affluent middle class community on Long Island, NY, I was not regularly exposed to the challenges many Americans face on a daily basis. I participated in various community service organizations in high school and college, but often became disillusioned with community service because much of the work centered on fundraising activities and not directly serving those in need. I desired service work that was focused on a specific community and centered on making individuals more aware of societal needs.

I didn't know that what I was looking for in a service experience had a name until I arrived in the Denver campus for my training. There, I was made aware of service learning. Service learning is a foreign concept to most people. As an educator, I am well aware that the two goals of community service and education are often approached independently. But in AmeriCorps\*NCCC this is quite the opposite. Each service project offers a unique, multifaceted learning experience.

During AmeriCorps, I had the incredible opportunity to work with an organization called CommonBond, Minnesota's largest provider of affordable housing. My team was chosen to run educational youth programs for the children of residents that lived in the various CommonBond buildings. The experience not only provided me with all the lessons and knowledge that come with teaching a diverse group of children, but it also awakened me to the commitment government has to its citizens to ensure safe, affordable housing options are available to all members of society. I saw first hand that when a family has proper housing, they can begin to care for their other needs, including

securing a job, going to school and becoming an active member in the community. A large proportion of the residents that lived at my housing site were recent immigrants from East Africa who were seeking political asylum. I heard first hand the horrors many of the families experienced in their homelands and the struggles they uncounted in making the transition to life here in America.

I am now attempting to instill this same concept of service learning into my classroom. Just last week, when I introduced the concept of scarcity as the basis of all economic decisions, I provided my class with a global IQ test which required students to think about poverty, disease and other unmet human needs from a worldwide perspective. As I continue to grow as an educator, I aspire to introduce the concept of civics and service learning into Social Studies curriculum. Instead of merely discussing issues like poverty and homelessness with my class, I hope to have my students' experience these realities first hand by taking their learning into the community and serving as volunteers in soup kitchens and public housing sites.

One of the strange things about being in AmeriCorps\*NCCC, is it creates a sense of national community and identity that you cannot fully appreciate until you graduate from the program. When you are away from your campus on a project, it is often easy to become consumed with your specific mission and forget that you are part of this large movement dedicated to national service. Although I experienced this feeling of detachment, it often coincided with a memorable event. That memory instantly jogged my senses and reminded me that that I was part of something bigger than myself, my team or even a regional campus.

This first happened to me during the middle of my first round project with Habitat for Humanity in Miami, Florida. Members of my team were at the airport awaiting flights to visit their families when a man walked up to me, shook my hand and thanked me for doing the work I do in AmeriCorps. He later told me that he was the recent recipient of a Habitat for Humanity home built by an AmeriCorps\*NCCC team the prior year. With tears in his eyes, he told me that he developed a renewed faith in the government and the youth of America. As

he said, "It's easy to go about your life thinking no one cares, but then a group of motivated individuals come and you find your spirits raised. You kids don't just work; you elevate a person's faith in society. You will always be welcome in my house."

When I flew home that day, I had never felt as proud of my involvement in a program. AmeriCorps\*NCCC remains a distinct piece of my identity and how I choose to define myself.

This summer I was astounded when my mother, a New York City teacher, told me that an NCCC team from the Perry Point, Maryland campus was working in her school. She told the Corps members that only a few months prior, her son was traveling around the country doing the same good work that they were doing. I can only hope that her words provided a similar awakening and a deep understanding - that they are not alone, but a part of something greater than themselves, a national organization of people dedicated to making positive changes in the world.

In a time when disaster recovery and homeland security top our nation's priorities, a strong and well-trained AmeriCorps\*NCCC is vital to victims' immediate and long-term needs. From day one at NCCC, we trained in disaster relief services and were ready to deploy at a moment's notice. After hurricanes Rita and Katrina, every team from our campus except my team and one other deployed to the Gulf Coast. Although this decision was completely out of my hands, it was hard to accept that we were left behind. We knew that we had important service work to complete in other parts of the country, but the Gulf Coast work was where the real excitement and hands-on opportunities were. In the Gulf, my fellow Corps Members were working tirelessly around the clock to field calls, remove debris, staff supply warehouses and coordinate relief efforts. I will never forget my friend, Elijah Washburn's story about how he single-handedly coordinated a team of medical volunteers for a residential doctor who established a clinic on his front lawn, in Pascagoula, Mississippi, to treat local residents. During and after any disaster, NCCC members are prepared to play a vital role in managing relief efforts.

National and community service is one of the most important missions a government can pursue, especially for a country that funds so many programs to help the rest of the world. The fact that an organization like AmeriCorps exists renews my faith in our national agenda and elected officials. Although the program is only 10 months in length, I believe that my experience will stay with me for a lifetime.

AmeriCorps\*NCCC establishes national and community service as a way of life. I speak for all my fellow teammates when I say that AmeriCorps\*NCCC leads to a lifetime of service. My friends from the National Civilian Community Corps are now America's firefighters, Red Cross staff, medical students, counselors, volunteers, teachers and yes, AmeriCorps members engaged in another year of service. AmeriCorps\*NCCC creates a new breed of young and passionate leaders that are in tune with the needs of the country and intensely dedicated to national and community service.

Thank you again for your invitation to speak. If you have any questions, I would be very happy to answer them.

**David Edelman** served as a Corps Member in the AmeriCorps\*NCCC in 2005. While in AmeriCorps, he helped construct 8 houses with Habitat for Humanity in Miami, Florida, organized summer activities for people with special needs at Easter Seals' Camp Sunnyside in Des Moines, Iowa, taught educational youth programs at CommonBond's public housing sites in Minneapolis, Minnesota and performed in a civics theater troupe at school districts across Colorado with Learn & Serve America. Before joining AmeriCorps\*NCCC he received his bachelor's degree in Economics from the University of Michigan. He is currently student teaching in a high school economics class in Long Island, NY while pursuing his Master's of Education in Social Studies at Hofstra University.