

Testimony of Van Jones
House Committee on Education and Labor
Hearing on National Service
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Introduction

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McKeon, and distinguished Members of the Committee. I am Van Jones, founding president of Green For All, a national organization dedicated to building an inclusive green economy strong enough to lift people out of poverty. Green For All fights poverty and pollution at the same time by advocating for a commitment to, and an investment in, job creation, job training, and entrepreneurial opportunities in the emerging green economy – especially for people from disadvantaged communities.

I have attached to my testimony a concept paper entitled “Clean Energy Corps: Jobs, Service and Equal Opportunity in America’s Clean Energy Economy.” This document represents a blueprint for the transition to the green economy as envisioned by the Clean Energy Corps Working Group, a collaboration of Green For All, the Apollo Alliance, the Center for American Progress, the Energy Action Coalition, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, The Corps Network, The Susquehanna Group, Innovations in Civic Participation, and others.

While it is my intention this morning is to focus on the important role that service has to play in the transition to a green economy, let me first outline the bigger picture, as framed by the Clean Energy Corps White Paper.

Most basically and most broadly, the Clean Energy Corps, or CEC, seeks an integration of civic, workforce, and economic development that creates value for workers, employers, communities, and the planet.

The CEC accomplishes these ambitious and important goals through three interrelated parts: job creation, job training, and pipelines to job training – particularly for disadvantaged and disconnected youth – that begin with service.

These three components will be intentionally connected through state and local partnerships to create well-defined career pathways for CEC participants, moving them from the entry point of service, to specific skills training, to placement, job retention and careers in energy efficiency, energy service, and other industries of the green economy.

To succeed, the CEC will require:

- New funding for a public revolving loan fund that would enable researchers, developers, business, and entrepreneurs to pursue new green technologies and products.
- Full appropriation for the Green Jobs Act to develop a green workforce.
- Increased funding for the Corporation for National and Community Service to increase and improve energy and conservation-related service opportunities through a Clean Energy Service Corps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve programs.

It is about this last piece, increased support for national service, and specifically for a Clean Energy Service Corps, that I am here to talk about this morning.

Service is central to the CEC. The Clean Energy Service Corps is designed to utilize service as a strategy for engaging disadvantaged and disconnected young people in energy and conservation related service while at the same time introducing them to and preparing them for, careers in the green economy. The nation's youth Service and Conservation Corps have been doing this for decades and, with your support, they can do much more.

Background

We have seen in history how service in conservation can repair the environment and strengthen the spirit of Americans in hard times. Seventy-five years ago, the stock market crashed and millions of Americans lost their jobs. In 1933, in response to the Depression, President Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). To this day, the CCC is still considered one of the most successful programs in American history. It provided work and vocational training for 3.5 million unemployed single young men while conserving the country's natural resources and building its infrastructure. By some estimates, the men of the CCC planted as many as 3 billion trees, protected 40 million acres of farmland from erosion, built 47,000 bridges, drained 248,000 acres of swamp land, replanted almost a million acres of grazing land, built 125,000 miles of roads, fought fires, and created 800 state parks and 52,000 acres of campgrounds. At the same time, the CCC provided hope and support to both the young men and their families.

It is time for a new CCC focused on creating the green economy. Youth in the United States are facing an employment crisis. According to the Center for Labor Market Studies (CLMS) at Northeastern University, the employment rate for teens is at its lowest rate in more than 60 years – with only 32.8 percent of all teens and only 22.7 percent of black teens in the workforce. Further, of the 1.2 million jobs that were lost last year, approximately 60 percent were held by workers under the age of 25. Not only are these young people not working, they are not attending school either. Even before this recession, one out of every three ninth graders failed to graduate from high school in four years and more than half of all young people of color from low-income communities drop out entirely. Currently, nearly 4 million young people, ages 18 to 24 – roughly 15 percent of all young adults – are neither in school nor working. Tragically, too many of these young people will wind up in prison or dead.

We have a solution. Like Roosevelt, we simply need to put the pieces together with a unifying, mobilizing call for national service to join the urgent effort to curb global warming and help build a green economy, supported by adequate funds to ramp up models that have proven their effectiveness and develop new ones where necessary. The call must also ask that we connect environmental work with the proven, but overlooked, ability of national service programs to play a unique role in building job readiness, particularly in building pathways to prosperity for poor people and communities. The Clean Energy Service Corps, the national service component of the CEC, will leverage the energy-saving efforts of public agencies; galvanize communities; and successfully apply technical skills, project management expertise, and the power of service to make a difference in energy use and the impact of fossil fuels on our environment, while enabling young men and women to produce valued and visible change in communities, gain skills relevant to the growing green economy, advance educationally, and become responsible and engaged workers and citizens.

Unlike Roosevelt, however, we do not have to start from scratch. We already have a model and a network from which to work. Modern day Service and Conservation Corps have an established and proven record of providing educational and economic opportunities to disadvantaged and disconnected young people through energy and conservation related service.

A Modern Day CCC

With support from AmeriCorps and other federal, state, and local funding sources, as well as public and private sector partners, the nation's 136 Service and Conservation Corps operate in 46 states and serve 26,000 young people every year. Fifty-one percent of these young men and women are people of color, 53 percent come from families living below the poverty line, and 60 percent do not have a high school diploma. In terms of service ranging from four to 24 months, these young people serve in cities, suburbs, and rural areas performing energy audits and retrofits, weatherizing homes, creating community gardens and green spaces, running recycling programs, building trails, planting trees, removing invasive species, reducing hazardous fuels, and fighting wildfires.

Serving in teams, Corpsmembers learn how to solve problems, take responsibility, and take pride in a job well done – all foundational workforce competencies. In return for their efforts, Corpsmembers receive guidance from adult leaders who serve as mentors and role models. They have access to a wide range of supportive services, such as child care, transportation, and counseling. They also have opportunities to further their education and earn money for college or additional training.

To advance educational progress, many Corps have created their own charter schools, either in partnership with public schools or on their own. Many grant diplomas as well as prepare Corpsmembers for the GED. Many also have strong relationships with community colleges.

Through intentionally designed service projects, Corps provide training in a wide range of job skills, many of which lead to employer-recognized certifications, including weatherization certification (which can be national), OSHA certification (a 30-hour course), power tools (including operations and maintenance), welding, skilled trades apprenticeship readiness training certificate, hazardous materials handling, plumbing, commercial drivers' licenses, and other operators' licenses (e.g. forklifts). Many of these certifications can lead to green jobs—jobs in energy efficiency retrofitting and wind turbine production, for example, look a lot like traditional construction and manufacturing jobs, and the early training and certification paths are similar.

Overall, Corps raise the quality of workforce readiness, increase educational gains, and nurture sustained, intentional engagement with the community. Service enables Corpsmembers who have gotten off track to reverse former patterns of behavior, not only to find new values, but to be accountable for living those values. They create visible and valued contributions. They identify and solve public problems.

Corps witness a transformation in the young people they serve, especially those that have been left behind by other initiatives. What they need is a real opportunity: someone who will challenge them and support them. Where that has happened, the results are significant. Here are just a few examples of how Corps across the country are improving lives, communities, and the environment.

Examples

Members of the Montana Conservation Corps, as part of a state-wide governor's initiative, Warm Hearts Warm Homes Montana, have weatherized and retrofit more than 4,000 homes in low-income communities and reservations across the state, significantly reducing energy costs for low-income home owners and renters by installing inexpensive improvements, such as window kits, hot water heater blankets, weather strips, and energy-efficient light bulbs. As you know, 40 percent of our energy costs come from energy use in buildings. This is hands-on work that requires a major mobilization.

In Denver, Colorado, members of the Mile High Youth Corps, approximately 50 percent of whom are high school dropouts, perform energy audits and retrofits that produce \$110 in annual utility savings for low-income home owners. In just one year, Corpsmembers saved over 16 million gallons of water, over one million kilowatt-hours of energy consumption, and created a life cycle air pollution reduction of over 6 million pounds of carbon monoxide—the equivalent of removing 540 cars from the road for a year. Many of these Corpsmembers, having obtained their GED during their term of service, will be placed in positions with local utility agencies.

In Freemont, Ohio, the WSOS Quilter Civilian Conservation Corps is housed in a Community Action Agency. Leveraging additional resources from the community, Corpsmembers learn weatherization skills on the job. This training, which is complemented by relevant college coursework, leads to nationally recognized certification. WSOS graduates have been deployed to other CAAs throughout the state to help meet the needs of other under-resourced rural communities.

In Madison, Wisconsin, Operation Fresh Start, which runs a Civic Justice Corps model that serves formerly incarcerated and other court-involved youth, builds energy efficient low-income housing that meets or exceeds Wisconsin energy standards by up to 25 percent. By installing high quality insulation and energy efficient appliances, Operation Fresh Start Corpsmembers enable low-income residents to save on their energy bills year round.

In my own home town of Oakland, California, Civicorps, which is also a Civic Justice Corps model, works in partnership with the Mayor's office, the Department of Human Services, local law enforcement, and a local Sustainable Business Alliance, to reintroduce non-violent juvenile offenders into the community through a variety of green service projects that enable Corpsmembers to gain skills and employment opportunities with green employers. Civicorps uses service projects as field work for science, math, and English classes—and as experiences that, reflected on, enable Corpsmembers to see themselves as valued contributors to the common good. To date, the majority of Civicorps Corpsmembers have obtained their GED and gained exposure to and funding for postsecondary education. A large number have received apprenticeships or employment with partner businesses. Overall, Civicorps boasts an impressive eight percent recidivism rate in a county where the overall recidivism rate is nearly 80 percent.

The Case for Expansion

Just in case the above examples failed to convince you, the CEC makes good economic sense. According to a cost-benefit analysis conducted by Oak Ridge National Laboratory, every dollar invested in weatherization produces \$3.71, of which \$1.83 is energy-related benefits and \$1.88 is non-energy-related. The National Consumer Law Center reports that energy efficiency benefits low-income households through reduced housing loss and abandonment, reduced loss of service due to terminations, improved property values and reduced health effects. Not to mention the savings and benefits of having a skilled, competitive workforce as opposed to large populations of out-of-school, out-of-work young adults.

Despite having weatherized more than 5.3 million homes, much work remains to be done. Oak Ridge National Laboratory found that only 16 percent of households eligible for the Weatherization Assistance Program have been served. Altogether, more than 27 million homes are currently eligible for assistance, of which 10 to 15 million are good candidates for weatherization.

Conclusion

We are going to need many hands to build a new, green workforce. Not only can the nation's Service and Conservation Corps help to meet this need, but in doing so they can change the lives of disconnected young people and the communities in which they live. For low-income, low-skilled young people, the emerging green economy offers pathways out of poverty. Corps, with their emphasis on learning and growing through service projects that meet community needs, provide an ideal setting for that journey.

Last Congress, you had the foresight to include a Clean Energy Service Corps in the GIVE Act. Even before the economy took a downward turn, the Energy Conservation Corps would have enabled Service and Conservation Corps and other non-profit organizations to serve thousands of additional young people. Given the current economic crisis and the need for a new green economy, the Clean Energy Service Corps is even more critical than it was just last year.

By providing an environment in which young men and women make meaningful, tangible, and lasting contributions to their communities, experience success, develop positive leadership skills and move toward a lifetime of service to their communities and the nation, the ECC will play a role like that of the CCC of the 1930's: it will instill hope and love of country in a new generation of young Americans.

I hope that it is your intention to, once again, include a Clean Energy Service Corps in your forthcoming bill and I hope that you will continue to view service as a strategy for solving all kinds of challenges that face our young people, our communities, and our nation.

Thank you.