

Memorandum and Testimony

To: 119K Commission

Fr: Alan Khazei, Co-Chair More Perfect, Co-Founder and Former CEO City Year

Re: Service Year Fellowship Program for Opportunity Youth in Connecticut

Dt: August 7, 2024

Introduction:

I'm inspired by the 119K Commission's commitment to developing a strategy for Opportunity Youth in Connecticut. My testimony offers some suggestions as to how to go about this and how service could be used as part of this strategy. Connecticut is an ideal state to take on this challenge as it is significant enough to garner real attention but also small enough to actually develop a pathway for its opportunity youth. This memo lays out some ideas, including developing a broad based Service Year Fellowship program similar to what Governors Moore and Cox have developed in their states.

Developing an overall Strategy:

If I were in your shoes, I would begin by bringing together a set of leaders who have developed successful model programs that engage opportunity youth and provide them with pathways to education and employment. Among the leaders and programs I would include are:

Mary Ellen Sprenkel CEO of the Corps Network

John Valverde, CEO of Youthbuild

Dorothy Stoneman, Founder of Youthbuild and Opportunity Youth United

Gerald Chertavian, Founder of Year Up

Lisbeth Shepherd, Founder of Green City Force

Tonya Gayle, Executive Director of Green City Force

Geoffrey Canada, Founder of Harlem Children's Zone

Fagan Harris, Founder of Baltimore Corps and Gov. Moore's Chief of Staff

Hector Rivera, Executive Director of Our Piece of the Pie Hartford

Jay Williams, CEO of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving

Paul Monteiro, Maryland Secretary of Service and Civic Innovation

Neil Abercrombie, Governor Cox Senior Advisor for Legislative Affairs and Policy

I would ask these leaders for their ideas as to what it would take to develop a strategy for the 44,000 Opportunity Youth in CT who are experiencing moderate

disconnection and also learn from them what has worked in their programs to meet the needs of Opportunity Youth.

If any of these programs are in CT I would ask them what it would take to scale their programs and for the programs that are not in CT, I would ask them what it would take to bring their programs to CT and what it would take to put them on a path to scale. In addition, I would bring together any of the programs, like Our Piece of the Pie, that are CT based and working successfully with Opportunity Youth and ask them the same questions. I would also form a coalition of these programs and discuss ways for them to work together and to learn from each other.

Mary Ellen Sprenkel has been a driving force behind the American Climate Corps. She is a native of CT and is excited to help develop a Climate or Conservation Corps in CT and I would in particular ask her what it would take to make that happen as the Corps Network programs have been very successful with Opportunity Youth.

Developing a Service Year Fellowship program for CT

In addition to the above, I would develop a Service Year Fellowship program for CT as a way to engage more opportunity youth to provide needed services in communities, while also giving them important skills development that puts them on a pathway to further education or a job and career. Service programs have a demonstrated track record in addition to helping young people gain specific job skills based on their service work, and also developing the skills that 21st century employers increasingly value. These include, being able to work as part of a team, empathy, leadership and taking initiative, problem solving, working with people of different backgrounds and more.

Service year fellowships is a decades-old proposed national service concept that awards young people who wish to serve with fellowships. These young people then have the opportunity to choose to serve with one of a wide variety of nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and faith-based organizations that have been certified by state service commissions and/or certifying nonprofit organizations. This bipartisan concept empowers individuals with additional choice in where they want to spend their service year. Additionally, service year fellowships allow access to corps members by smaller organizations—including faith-based organizations and organizations in urban, rural or underserved areas—who would not otherwise have the organizational and grant-making

infrastructure to compete and receive this support through existing AmeriCorps funding.

The concept of a Service Year Fellowship has a long history of bipartisan support. It was included in the bipartisan 2009 Serve America Act that was signed into law but never fully funded. Additionally, a similar concept was included in legislation put forward in the spring of 2020 by the independent and bipartisan congressionally-created National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. Recently, both Governors Moore of Maryland and Cox of Utah have developed new Service Year Fellowships in their states with strong bi-partisan support from their legislatures.

Connecticut could develop a model program with the following criteria:

- Organizations where fellows choose to serve would be required to meet general criteria similar to AmeriCorps programs and would register with Serve Connecticut, the Connecticut State Service Commission, or another certifying nonprofit organization.
- Service Year Fellowships would provide a living stipend equal to the equivalent of \$10 to \$15 an hour or the average living stipend for AmeriCorps programs in Connecticut and an AmeriCorps education award, or another post service cash award for those young people who are not going on to further education or training after their term of service. (Maryland is offering a cash alternative for their Service Year participants.) The fellowships would be awarded by Serve Connecticut to 17-25 year olds who apply to receive a fellowship, with a significant number of fellowships designated for opportunity youth.
- Service Year Fellows could then apply to serve at any non profit or public agency that has been certified. Their fellowship would be contingent upon them being selected by an organization. The organizations would take responsibility for training and supervision. Fellows would become part of the Connecticut Service Year Fellows Corps (or another name such as the Serve Connecticut Corps) and meet other fellows through some common training, swearing in and graduation ceremonies, signature service projects (whereby large numbers of fellows work together to build a playground, paint a school, turn an abandoned lot into a playground etc on the MLK Day of Service, 9/11 or other days), mentors and mentor events, meetings with local leaders, locally based all Fellow gatherings, and other connections developed throughout their service experience. The Fellows would also have some common branded “swag” such as Jackets, Backpacks, T-Shirts and Polo shirts, buttons, etc that identify them as Serve Connecticut Corps members.

The value of a Service Year Fellows Corps is that it gives young people greater choice to work in a variety of community-based organizations on the issues that they are most passionate about. It also allows for more grassroots and community-based organizations to be able to engage young people in their work through a service year. It is also a program that can be scaled quickly given the vast number of nonprofits in Connecticut that could serve as host organizations. One other factor to consider is that it would be beneficial to have at least 2 Fellows at any one host organization so they have another young person they could be serving with. Part of the Service Year Fellow experience is that each fellow should also have a Mentor who will be working with them on their own post service plan throughout their service year so the fellow has a clear pathway to further education, training or a job once their service year concludes. Mentors can come from host organizations, service alumni, military veterans, businesses, non profits, or public agency employees. In addition to recruiting nonprofits to serve as host organizations it would be valuable to build a coalition of businesses – small and large – who commit to hiring service year fellows once they complete their terms of service. This program will be most successful if it is a true and comprehensive public-private partnership.

Finally, the program could be funded through a combination of State funds and philanthropy and AmeriCorps could be approached to provide some funding and the post service education awards. AmeriCorps members who serve full-time for a year complete 1700 hours. At that level and a stipend of \$11 to \$12 an hour plus a post service award, each Service Year Fellow would cost about \$27,000 a year, depending on the size of the Post Service Award. It is a full-time program so it is not cheap. But many studies show that for each dollar invested in a service program, there is a return of at least \$3 to \$4 plus in benefits to the community and state from the service work provided, service alumni going on to higher education and/or jobs and thus returning money in taxes.

An initial program of 500 to 1000 Fellows would cost between \$13.5 million to \$27 million. There is also the opportunity to approach national funders as this would be a new strategy to engage opportunity youth. Carnegie Corporation for example has provided funding for both the Utah and Maryland Service Year Fellowship programs and there are other national funders such as the Ford Foundation that have made fighting poverty and promoting opportunity a centerpiece of their giving strategy. Finally, if Connecticut launched this program with a true public-private partnership, it would serve as a model for other states and the federal government to adopt this strategy and help it scale.

Conclusion:

The 119K Commission has the opportunity to unite a variety of Public and Private Sector partners to develop a groundbreaking strategy to meet the needs of opportunity youth in Connecticut. Building upon existing service programs and new ideas, such as a Service Year Fellowship program, CCM and other partners, could both provide new pathways at scale for opportunity youth in Connecticut, but also demonstrate a model that could be replicated in other states and inspire the federal government and national philanthropy and business leaders to scale this strategy nationally. I would be excited to explore this potential with you in a follow up conversation if you are interested.