

Revised
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**Testimony of Robert Tietze
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Experience Corps
Before the House Aging & Older Adult Services Committee
In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
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Chairman Mundy, Chairman Hennessey and members of the Committee: Thank you for your leadership on this issue and for the opportunity to talk with you today.

During last week's hearing before this committee, former Senator Harris Wofford testified to the importance of expanding the infrastructure for civic engagement opportunities for older Pennsylvanians. As part of his testimony, he also called for the state-wide expansion of Experience Corps, a program that has, over the past 10 years, established one of the most effective and successful operational models in the country for the large-scale civic involvement of retirees and older adults. In doing so, Experience Corps has created a pathway for retirees to become leaders in their communities and to find meaningful and rewarding roles in retirement. In short - to share their life-time of experience and expertise with the next generation. Working with our partner, AARP, we are developing a state-wide strategic expansion plan and, I hope, with the support of the state legislature and private funders, be in a position to launch this initiative soon.

However, there is much more to the story of Experience Corps and civic engagement of retirees and older adults that I would also like to share with you. These include the physical, cognitive and social health benefits that civic engagement has on older adults and the tremendous difference that Experience Corps members have on student academic achievement. In addition, there is the impact on social capital. I hope that you will see how programs such as Experience Corps are more than "volunteer programs," but how they can play an integral role in the overall plan that this committee is developing.

As a unique program that brings the untapped power of experience, talent, and time, Experience Corps has the potential of addressing three (3) critical social challenges that are before us:

- *Healthy Aging & Health Care for the Frail Elderly* - Nationally, there are 70 million adults over age 55. In the next 22 years this number will more than double and represents 31% of the US population. As the state with the third largest population of people over age 60, at 25%, Pennsylvania will be at the fore-front of this massive demographic shift and on the front-line of finding effective solutions.
- *Decreasing Social Capital*—Research shows an increased sense of isolation and lack of connectedness to community and traditional social networks that have been shown to affect physical, mental, and emotional health, the economy, crime rates, and the intricate social threads that create the fabric of healthy community life.
- *Significant Decrease in Early Childhood Literacy Levels and Increases in Drop-Out Rate* - 45% of students in elementary school are tested as being below reading

proficiency and there is at present a 30% drop-out rate for students entering the 9th grade. The likelihood for a child not reading at grade level proficiency by the end of third grade decreases significantly each year onward.

Former Commerce Secretary and co-founder of the investment banking firm Blackstone Group, Pete Petersen once said that “we have met the enemy, and he is the aging us...” This statement was based on his projection of an economic catastrophe awaiting the United States as a result of the cost of entitlements and health care for America’s retirees. There is no denying that this will be a challenge for our society.

However, there are other ways of looking at this challenge. Former Secretary of Health and Education John Gardner said that “We are all faced with a series of great opportunities – brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems.”

The possibility exists through the development of large-scale infrastructure for civic engagement that social capital can be increased, children can achieve success academically and in life, and most critically, retirees, baby boomers and older adults can live active healthy lives and as a result have the potential to decrease health care costs over the long term. Through civic engagement we may just be able to address in part the seemingly “insoluble problem” of rising health care costs coupled with an aging society.

Current research is showing that civic engagement provides the type of lower-intensity physical activity that had proven to be *as beneficial* as high-intensity exercise. However, while some initiatives to recruit older adults into physical activity interventions have been successful, this success has been limited by access and socioeconomics. Dr. Linda Fried, at Johns Hopkins University, states that “America needs novel approaches to increase the physical activities of older adults...” She goes on to state that by expanding our repertoire of community based strategies...more older adults may be more attached to generative roles of an intergenerational volunteer program than to a health promotion program.”

In a research article published in the *Journal of Urban Health* through the New York Academy of Medicine in 2006, Dr. Fried and her colleagues shared the results of an extensive scientific study on the health benefits of civic engagement—specifically through the Experience Corps program—on older adults participants. The full study report can be found on the Experience Corps web site, however, I would like to share a few important findings:

- Compared to the control group (non EC participants), participants’ physical activity increased between 220-270 minutes over week, while the non-participant groups decreased to between 140-170 minutes per week. In addition, the level of household activities such as chores and gardening, increased quite significantly among the Experience Corps participants, whereas the non-participant group showed no increase in these activities.

- When looking at across-the-board measurements, the Experience Corps participants showed a *doubling of weekly physical activities* over the non-Experience Corps group. Physical activity, as we know, increases circulation, lower joint pain caused by arthritis and releases endorphins which play an integral role in feelings of well-being.
- Further supporting this theory are studies that may have linked civic engagement to lower mortality and disability rates and improved self-assess health. Although more research is needed in this area, these results are indicators for the psychosocial benefits of rewarding roles in retirement.

Volunteering, in addition to increasing psychosocial well-being, provides much needed physical activity. The JHU study found that on the multiple of the Metabolic Rate (METS) volunteer activities can compare favorably with traditional leisure activities in terms of energy expenditure. For example, “moderate play with children has the same METS as Tai Chi.” What are the unique characteristics of Experience Corps that can be attributed to these findings and the continual reports that we received from Experience Corps members about feeling “re-connected to the world and feeling “like the little aches and pains don’t matter so much anymore....”?

- **#1:** Experience Corps members serve 15 hours each week, thus providing the intensity level of increased physical activity. The process of preparing to go to school, getting to the school, and then the physical activity within the school and the return home add up to a significant number of calories being burned and a sustained increase in circulation and cognitive and social interactive activity.
- **#2:** Experience Corps members serve in teams of 6-12 members, providing a built-in support network and an expanded network of social contacts and opportunities. Members report having been able to make new friendships through the program—as well as gaining new self-confidence in initiating friendships outside of their Experience Corps activities.
- **#3:** Experience Corps members are learning and acquiring new skills and expertise. In order to be an effective tutor, significant ongoing training and performance assessment are required. Experience Corps members are returning to school not only on the more obvious level of serving in a school, but are themselves returning to school, and once again becoming motivated learners.
- **#4:** Experience Corps members engage in leadership development training and fill alternate part-time staff roles within the program structure. This employs latent leadership skills as well as the wealth of life skills and experience that they have to share. These enhanced leadership skills translate to the communities in which they live, as well as further increasing the meaningfulness of their service in Experience Corps. Over the years, a number of our members have moved from the program; using their experience and new expertise gained to land part-time jobs in child care, as classroom assistants, working with their local libraries, and in two cases, as professional storytellers. So, you see, Experience Corps in more than civic engagement, more than a method for increasing physical, cognitive and social activity – It is also, it would appear, a job training program. Although I have to admit that this wasn’t necessarily a consideration in our early planning!

- #5: Experience Corps helps re-build community social capital. Harvard Researcher Robert Putnam cited the Philadelphia Experience corps as one of the 12 most effective models for accomplishing this goal. There have been so many times when members have told me how much more connected they feel to their neighbors and their community. Several have shared instances where they are now able to stop and chat with students who they know from school and with the parents of these kids as well. In one such instance, a member told me that she was walking down the street near her house. As she approached a group of boys from school. "One them smiled and said 'hello Mrs. Johnson....' It made me feel so good inside..." This brief interaction underscores the power that programs like Experience Corps can have on re-connecting us to community and to one another. Putnam talks about the importance of these small interactions as part of the larger picture of high social and community connectivity. This incident of social interaction acts as a spark that can feed additional interactions that, ultimately reach a tipping point that can literally transform a neighborhood.

To further underscore the impressive health benefits of civic engagement, I would like to share with you the story of one of our many, many volunteers. Her name is Elaine. Elaine joined us after hearing about the program from a letter sent out by our partner AARP. At the time when she received the letter Elaine was home-bound, and in fact, bed-bound. She was forced to retire from her job due severe physical disability that made it difficult and extremely painful for her to walk. As she describes it, "I was depressed and lost any *desire* to even get out of bed or to do anything..." Then she read the letter asking for AARP members to help children learn to read. She told me she became emotional when she thought about the struggles of these children and at that moment decided she was going to try to help. Elaine has been in the program now for seven years. She's been highlighted in *US News & World Report* and other media. She uses a walker and she needs help getting to and from the school. But when she stood up before a group and said "this program saved my life," I began to fully realize just how powerful this experience was and how important it was to make sure we not only keep the program, but expand it so that others like Elaine might find new hope and a re-kindled desire to be apart of their community. Even more importantly, Elaine's experience showed the impact that being active in one's community can have on physical health-as well as cognitive and social health. There are many other stories I can share about how Experience Corps literally transformed the lives of our members. How many of our members discovered new talents and explored new interest as a result of the simple step of becoming civically engaged. But Elaine's story particularly embodies the notion that civic engagement should be included in any strategy designed for impacting health amongst older adults.

A third critical challenge that I mentioned earlier and one which Experience Corps has had a tremendous impact is in improving academics and student performance. Specifically, increasing reading and math skills and increasing grade-level proficiencies for elementary school children. Each year we measure the progress of students served by Experience Corps and each year our students increase their grade level on average by over one full grade level. More importantly, they show significant increases in their rate of learning. This represents an unprecedented leap and underscores the need for one-to-

one intervention for these students who are at-risk. The probability of a student who is reading below grade level at the start of fourth grade of reaching grade level proficiency in future years decreases exponentially. This ultimately contributes to the enormous drop-out rate we are witnessing and why it is so essential that we provide intensive intervention at the elementary level through programs such as Experience Corps.

And it is not only the academic tutoring that has benefits. It is the connection between a caring adult and a child who is struggling - not only academically but often emotionally as well. Our members report that they often spend a portion of their one-to-one time talking with their child about "life's problems" and providing emotional support and unconditional caring that each child needs to succeed. Working in 40 of the city's most at-risk communities, it is not unusual that the Experience Corps member is the only adult in a child's life that is supportive and committed to their academic success.

I want to also stress that when our members talk about "their children," they really do mean "their children." In so many ways, the children and the Experience Corps member form an extended family. Experience Corps members then continue that extension to the parents, engaging them in their child's learning and growth. During one of our Parent Workshops, a principal remarked, "How on earth did you get all of these parents to attend—we can't get any to come to teacher-parent night..." The answer was the Experience Corps members. They have a way of being able to connect with parents in the community that the school cannot. So you see, the Experience Corps program also provides a conduit or connection between the school and the community and, as another principal stated, "...is like having the community in the school!" Speaking of principals, in a survey of Experience Corps schools in Philadelphia and our sister programs across the US, principals rated the program as one of the important initiatives in their schools. One principal stated simply, "I don't know what I'd do without this program..."

Before closing, I would like to share a very brief history of how Experience Corps got started and how it has grown.

In 1996, with the leadership of Marc Freedman and Former Secretary of Health & Education John Gardner, we launched an 18 month demonstration program in five cities- New York, Minneapolis, Portland, Port Arthur Texas, and Philadelphia. The demonstrated program was called Experience Corps, and its goal, simply, was to see if retirees and older adults would answer the call to national service on a large scale. We decided to establish the program in schools and so, on a cold February morning in the basement classroom of Taylor Elementary School at Erie and 5th, seven hardy and brave retirees commenced the first Experience Corps training session. From this inauspicious beginning, the Philadelphia Experience Corps has now engaged well over 3,000 older adults, served over 35,000 children, and has provided over 1 million hours of service to at-risk children in over 50 schools. Along the way, we have developed a powerful partnership with AARP, received national recognition for excellence in programming and have garnered the support of some of the largest charitable foundations in the country.

Experience Corps began with the focus on the impact on the older volunteer, but we also realized that the impact the program was having was equally powerful on the students and the school, and ultimately on the community at large. Within a few years time, Experience Corps had become recognized as a leader in providing early childhood literacy support and had expanded to nine cities. With large investments from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies, we were able to implement a large-scale expansion that quadrupled the program's size by the end of the 2006 school year. We've received several awards and were identified, as I mentioned earlier, by *Harvard Researcher Robert Putnam*, the author of the book Bowling Alone, as one of the 12 most effective models in the US for building social capital.

Experience Corps is now in 20 cities across the US – large cities, small communities, rural towns - with Philadelphia the designated flagship and leader of this growing national network.

Conclusion

Last week, Senator Wofford states that “Instead of thinking of Pennsylvania as an aging state, we should be thinking of Pennsylvania as a state rich in opportunity. We cannot afford to miss this chance to engage mature and older workers in continued employment and charitable services.” I want echo the Senators call, and the call of John Gardner, for us to see this as an incredible opportunity. An opportunity to address those three critical challenges – expanding healthy aging strategies, building social capital and community strength, and achieving the educational goals of the state so that our children can succeed academically, socially, and personally. To accomplish that I would like to recommend the following initiatives:

Initiative #1:

Support the State-Wide Expansion of Experience Corps.

Experience Corps can act as an anchor for establishing a large-scale infrastructure across Pennsylvania for civic engagement of retirees and older adults. These efforts will harness the power and experience of older adults and expand our state's repertoire of physical, cognitive and social activities that lead to healthy aging and reduced health care costs over the long-term. Experience Corps will also be able to act as a catalyst for other civic engagement organizations and programs and will be able to provide resources and support for the continued diversification of civic opportunities.

Initiative #2:

Support Coming of Age.

Also funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and embarking on a state-wide expansion, the Center for Intergenerational Learning's Coming of Age initiative provides ways for retirees, or those soon to retire, to explore the limitless possibilities before them through courses, seminars, training and materials, as well as broadcasting civic service opportunities.

Initiative #3:**Support Institutional and Organizational Learning.**

Developing and managing efforts that engage older adults require new knowledge and organizational planning and expertise. The non-profit and private sectors will need to have resources and support effectively engage retirees and older adults in civic service and flexible employment opportunities.

Initiative #4**Support Intergenerational Strategies in Long-Term Care Facilities.**

Over the years I have worked with numerous nursing homes and community schools to establish structured community intergenerational programs. Projects ranging from oral history, to mural arts, to music and singing. These programs help bring the community into the nursing home facility and help residents feel connected, needed and wanted. These activities, like Experience Corps, can provide cognitive, social and physical activity that can increase the quality of life. The Center for Intergenerational Learning is a national resource for training and technical assistance in this area and through its national training center would be able to assist in the implementation of such a strategy.

Initiative #5:**Support the Re-Design of Traditional Long-Term Care Facility Design.**

Nursing homes and other long-term care facilities are clearly central components of the aging service operation. But these facilities needn't be isolated from their communities and lack a sense of home and comfort. I would like to recommend that Pennsylvania explore implementing the *Eden Alternative* approach to nursing home design. This unique and highly regarded model involves bringing dogs, carts, birds, and plants into a facility and radically shifting the focus from delivering scheduled institutional care to providing for the dignity and emotional well-being of the residents. The Eden Alternative now lists 300 Eden Home conversions in America and an additional 200 overseas, each offering a warm and stimulating environment – for residents, staff and visitors alike. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, working with Dr. Thomas, the founder of The Eden Alternative, has currently replaced more than 100 nursing homes nationwide with clusters of small, cozy houses, each sheltering eight to 10 residents in private rooms, with private bathrooms and an open kitchen. In other words, a place like home. Pennsylvania can be a leader in this area, as well as that of civic engagement.

We are delighted that the Pennsylvania Department of Aging has initiated a series of hearings to update the State Plan on Aging, as federally required and hope that Experience Corps, along with its partners, Experience Wave, AARP and the Center for Intergenerational Learning at Temple University, will be part of that process to help older people stay engaged in work, volunteering and civic life.

Pennsylvania's baby boomers are among its great resources, and on behalf of Experience Corps, I look forward to working with you and Secretary Dowd Eisenhower in your efforts to put in place policies to put their talents to good use.

Thank you Chairman Mundy, Chairman Hennessey and members of the Committee. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.
