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**Testimony submitted to the National Commission On Hunger
by Paul Winkeller**

Many thanks for the opportunity to provide this written testimony to the National Commission on Hunger.

My intention is to briefly make the case for “tweaking” the priorities of national service - currently outlined as six focus areas on the Corporation For National Service’s (CNS) website - and without any new funding insure that the work that gets done through national service, year in and year out, and across all its funding streams (e.g., AmeriCorps, Vista, Retired Senior Volunteer Program), more fully embraces the endemic problem of hunger and very low food security that continues to plague our great and prosperous nation.

I had the honor of leading two early national service AmeriCorps programs in the late 1990’s – the Albany Service Corps, located in New York’s State Capital Region, and the New York State Corps Collaboration, a statewide coalition of nearly a dozen youth corps program. The actual work of these programs was varied, ranging from low income housing to urban agriculture to in-school mentoring, but the food related work that many of these programs engaged - community gardening, larger scale urban agriculture, gleaning surplus produce at area farms, nutrition education in school and community settings - was often the most visible, the easiest and least expensive to organize and the results from which were not only immediately impactful but easily quantifiable.

However the problem is defined, and from whatever vantage point along the political spectrum the situation is viewed, hunger and very low food security sadly seems to have become almost institutionalized in the past decade. National organizations like the Food Resource and Action Center and the American Community Gardening Association, or where I live, in New York State, the Hunger Action Network and the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, have extensively documented the problem. For the purposes of this brief testimony there is no need to regurgitate what are truly frightening statistics for a country with such great wealth, including the world’s most productive agricultural system.

We know from the work of the organizations just cited that visits to local food pantries in urban, suburban and rural areas across the country are on the rise. Regional food banks around the country are distributing record amounts of fresh and surplus processed food, with much of the latter not being particularly nutritious but moving in great quantities into the emergency food system thanks largely to generous tax incentives.

The number of community, backyard, school and other gardens in communities of all sizes is expanding, as it always has during past periods of economic distress affecting middle and low income populations. Poor health and nutrition, attributable to lack of access to good food or insufficient knowledge about how to use healthy ingredients, is in part responsible for the growing crisis of diabetes and childhood obesity. The expense of treating these nutrition related problems in too many cases falls to emergency rooms, the most inefficient place to treat preventable disease and a spot in the health care delivery system whose cost too often falls on the U.S. taxpayer.

The good news about national service for the past nearly two decades is that we know, largely anecdotally, that there has been a lot of food and hunger related work that has occurred, and still takes place, under the rubric of national service, and a few examples will follow.

The bad news is the agency administering AmeriCorps, the Corporation For National Service (CNS), has no idea of the extent or impact of this kind of work. Surprisingly, there has never been a formal qualitative or quantitative assessment of food and hunger related work supported across all CNS funding streams (e.g., AmeriCorps, NCCC, RSVP, VISTA) during the program's existence. Lacking this analysis means it remains just a guess about how our nation's already existing, funded and institutionalized national service program might better meet the challenge of very low food security. Again, examples of how this might be done will also follow.

Established in 2009, Food Corps receives ongoing funding from AmeriCorps and each year its 100+ members work in states across the country on school and community gardens, nutrition education, summer feeding programs and other efforts that address very low food security as it affects low income families. The work of Food Corps is impressive and inspiring, the efficacy of its program is clear and quantifiable and the opportunities to scale up are apparent.

The Corps Network (TCN) is a national umbrella organization that serves as the voice of the nation's 127 service and conservation corps. These corps, with a team based service model, combine community service with pre-employment and job training skills development to a diverse array of mostly young adult Americans. In 2011 TCN surveyed its members, many of whom are funded by AmeriCorps, to find out how many were engaged in food related service work and what exactly they were doing. Over twenty programs responded, revealing activity like the Los Angeles Conservation Corps' work with students in school and market gardens, or Baltimore Civic Works long term efforts building community gardens and other urban agriculture ventures that encourage healthy local food growing while

providing its participants with important pre-employment and job training skills.

For the past four years, The New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCAH) has run a national summer VISTA program with a very low food security focus that engages over 100 VISTA members annually. In contrast to the direct, hands-on and team-based approach of AmeriCorps members in the programs cited previously, NYCCAH VISTA members are often placed singly or in small numbers in anti-hunger organizations around the country. Their work focuses on capacity building, with service activities that include developing strategies and protocols to insure that very low food security clients of the VISTA host agencies are able to access nutrition education along with public benefits to enable them to “move beyond the soup kitchen.”

While an observer can continue to identify activity in other national service program areas – for example, we know that participants in the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) have worked around the country in emergency feeding sites (food pantries and soup kitchens) – the overall impact, in the context of the huge challenge facing individual low food security households across the country, is, frankly, minimal.

National service, whose funding has been threatened but after nearly two decades of bipartisan support is apparently here to stay, presents an already existing infrastructure of programming that has the capacity to take a huge “bite” out of the low food security crisis that continues to grip our country – and without an infusion of new funding.

Here’s how we can turn the big ship of national service more in this direction:

- 1) As mentioned, and surprisingly with nearly twenty years of activity now completed, The Corporation for National Service has never undertaken a comprehensive report, nor does it have an annual reporting mechanism for documenting low household food security and hunger mitigation related work, examples of which have been cited in this testimony. It is critical to know about, document and then hopefully create and distribute programmatic templates for replicating successful efforts across all national service streams that may be ongoing but are not well known. Before reinventing the wheel it is critical to find out where national service has traveled in the past twenty years relating to low household food security and hunger. We may be surprised by the extent of activity. It is also possible that in taking a deep look we will learn about great opportunities lost because national service has never made

addressing the needs of low food security households a priority or focus area.

- 2) Congress should be asked to amend the enabling national service legislation to specifically address low household food security and hunger. Let's give at least equal weight to food and hunger as we do to other national priority areas. Or changing the focus may be as simple as rewriting the Corporation For National Service implementing regulations governing its national service activities.**
- 3) The Congressional Committee with oversight over CNS should assemble a national task force, representing public and private interests with proven success meeting the challenge of low household food security and hunger, both in and outside national service programming, to meet and develop a short and long range action plan to reorient national service more in the direction of hunger and low household food security. A key issue to address, in this context, is the current central role that states have in the oversight of new and existing national service programming. If low household food security and hunger are determined at the federal level to be a core priority or focus area, what does that mean to the states who currently have the central role in selecting and administering the bulk of national service programming?**

In closing, I would pose this simple question:

Why not to put energy, power, idealism and enthusiasm of AmeriCorps, now approaching twenty years in age and with hundreds of thousands of Americans of all ages and from all backgrounds having served – and which many have rightly called another branch of our nation's military – to address, head on, the eminently solvable crisis of low household food security and hunger that continues to exist across our nation?

Paul Winkeller is a consultant living near Albany, New York. He has over thirty five years of experience in both the public sector at all levels (local, state and federal government) and private sector (not-for-profit and for profit) in community service, youth corps, urban agriculture, community gardening and greening, employment and training and bike advocacy - with an emphasis on fund-raising, program development, communications and project management.

