

**WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON AGING**

**Listening Session**

**NATIONAL ALLIANCE for AGING RESEARCH**

**December 10, 2004**

**Statement of Tess Scannell, Director Senior Corps  
Corporation for National and Community Service**

**GOOD MORNING,**

Thank you, Madam Chairman. I'd like to thank the National Alliance for Aging Research for hosting this session and for accommodating others of us who have ideas about planning for an aging society.

I'm Tess Scannell, Director of the Senior Corps at the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Senior Corps is comprised of more than half a million volunteers age 55 and over who serve throughout the country in three programs – Foster Grandparent, Senior Companion and RSVP. These programs are operated by more than 1,300 grantees whose volunteers serve through more than 70,000 non-profit organizations nationwide.

This morning, you've heard about age related research issues that concern us as a nation.

I'm here to talk with you briefly about two issues – the health benefits of volunteering and how volunteering can be part of the solution to the growing demand for in-home services for the elderly.

First, the benefits of volunteering.

Volunteering, particularly for older retirees, contributes to the process of active aging because it helps one adjust to life without the structure of the workplace. Several research studies conducted indicate that, for older people, volunteering offers real personal, physical and emotional benefits. Such studies include those conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health, Duke University's Department of Sociology, Cornell University's Applied Gerontology Research Institute as well as the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. Specifically, these studies show that people who volunteer have fewer medical problems than the senior population at large because volunteer activity is shown to decrease the incidences of heart disease, diabetes, and cardiovascular

diseases. It also increases one's cognitive and mental well-being because it keeps the brain engaged which helps protect the memory. Older individuals who volunteer can remain healthier longer and hold on to their independence for longer periods of time.

We've all heard the numbers. Our population is aging. But it's not just because there are more than 76 million baby boomers. Our country's health care system has been extremely successful in ensuring that more and more individuals either live disease free or live longer with certain diseases and illnesses.

But many of these people require or will require some type of support to live independently. In fact, research indicates that by 2015 (the year of the White House Conference on Aging after this one) our country will have a crisis in long-term care and independent living support because the number of people needing assistance will be significantly higher than the number of people able to provide care – that includes family members and paid caregivers.

This means that our long-term care and independent living support systems are headed toward crisis. So, it is imperative that we, as a nation, take giant steps to improve the support structure of this burgeoning senior population without increasing the national debt or totally depleting the resources and energy of millions of family caregivers.

Okay – that’s our challenge. But here is our opportunity – -- and that opportunity comes in the form of national service. I mentioned that one of the programs of the Senior Corps is the Senior Companion program. This program provides peer to peer support to help ensure that the more “frail” older persons are able to remain in their homes as long as conceivably possible.

The volunteers in our program provide companionship, help with transportation as well as assist older persons with light chores. These activities helps the senior remain independent while it frees up the time of the professional who provides the more costly personal care that they are trained and licensed to provide.

The volunteers help increase the capacity of long-term care workers, such as nurses, nurses aides and home health aides and are an extremely valuable component of the continuum of care for these individuals. They also add value to the government's investments in other programs and provide measurable impact in this field.

As an example, I've brought along copies of the most recent evaluation of our Senior Companion program conducted by RTI International out of Research Triangle Park in North Carolina. This evaluation demonstrates the positive impact of our Senior Companions on the agencies, clients, and family members/caregivers served by the program. More than 60% of the agency staff contacted in a telephone survey for this evaluation reported that Senior Companions help free agency staff to do other agency work. And, the biggest complaint from the families and clients was that they didn't have enough time with the Companion.

So, you see, those of us in the service world believe that there is tremendous opportunity for volunteers in national service programs to become even more effective and help to reverse the current direction toward crisis in this field. However, it will require thoughtful collaboration with organizations in aging to ensure the complementary nature of the volunteer service. And, it will require additional training opportunities for volunteers. These training opportunities should be developed in collaboration with long-term care professionals and paraprofessional, in order to have even greater focus, greater impact, and thus greater effectiveness in avoiding the pending crisis.

And, that brings me to my last message. We believe that, national service is a truly effective strategy for solving not only the Independent Living crisis, but a vast array of other social dilemmas. Earlier, I also briefly mentioned the volunteers in the RSVP and Foster Grandparent Programs. Throughout our country, the volunteers in the Foster Grandparent program are serving to help ensure that children have a constant supportive adult in their lives.

They serve as mentors and tutors in numerous settings, including schools, Head Start centers, hospitals, homes for adjudicated youth—anywhere a child needs help.

The volunteers in our RSVP program are engaged in activities that range from testing the purity of water in their communities, to assisting with disaster relief efforts to helping low-income individuals complete their tax forms – every conceivable activity that helps to better communities.

My point is this. I believe that, just as volunteers can help to reverse the impending crisis in independent living, they can also help to make positive contributions in areas such as literacy, homelessness and the environment.

Admittedly, we have an aging society. But aging does not always mean loss and decline. We also have a baby boomer generation that brings with it a group of highly talented, educated, healthy, and financially secure individuals – individuals with the talents and skills to help us solve a multitude of community challenges.

I would suggest that we also take giant steps toward increasing the kind of volunteer opportunities, incentives, and support systems that stimulate and motivate them to help better their communities.

As a nation, we encourage people to make financial plans for later life. Let's also start to encourage them to plan their time, energy and experience for a cause that they care about in their community. As Director of Senior Corps, I've seen the difference it makes through the activities of the more than half a million older volunteers currently enrolled in our three Senior Corps programs.

Again, thank you, Madam Chairman, and the Alliance for your time and consideration of these issues.

### Relevant Studies

1. Harvard School of Public Health, Center for Communications, Reinventing Aging, Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement , 2004.



2. University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research (Marc A. Musik, A. Regular Herzog and James S. House, "Volunteering And Mortality among Older Adults: Findings from a National Sample.
3. Cornell University, Cornell Applied Gerontology Research Institute, "Social Integration and Longevity," Cornell Retirement and Well-Being Study.
4. Duke University, Department of Sociology, "Volunteering, by John Wilson, 1999.