

Testimony Submitted to the House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education March 25, 2014

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, my name is **Susan Lavigne** and I am Director of the Senior Volunteer Programs for The Opportunity Alliance in Portland, Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the National Senior Corps Association, representing over 350,000 older americans volunteering throughout the country.

SENIOR CORPS, administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, is dedicated to providing older Americans 55 and over volunteer opportunities to address critical community needs through its three programs -- Foster Grandparent Program, Senior Companion Program and RSVP

Senior Corps volunteers serve in a variety of community settings including schools, child development centers and Head Starts, Adult Day Programs, veteran centers as well as providing home visits to frail elders for companionship and transportation to medical appointments and grocery shopping enabling them to remain living independently.

I appear today to ask that you, as Members of the Subcommittee reject the President's FY 2015 Budget proposal to reduce and eventually eliminate funding for the Senior Corps. This is not the time, nor will it ever be, to devalue the contributions of the nations' senior volunteers, The President's budget poses a threat to the volunteers in all three Senior Corp programs and the communities they serve by eliminating 2/3 of RSVP volunteer programs nationwide and reducing by more than half, the weekly volunteer service by Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions.

If enacted, SENIOR CORPS, as we know it, will be eliminated. Just 1/3 of RSVP will be moved to a smaller component within CNCS and Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions will be moved into AmeriCorps, where their new positions have been characterized as "1/4 AmeriCorps" with a reduction to 450 hours a year--- a term that has offended many of our volunteers who in no way consider their efforts as 1/4.

FGP and SCP are stipended programs, in return for a significant commitment volunteers receive a nontaxable stipend of \$2.65 an hour if their income is less than 200% of poverty. They are not getting paid to volunteer, nor are they getting rich, but this token amount insures it does not cost them since the average volunteer in my program has retirement income less than 125% of poverty. One needs

appropriate clothing, and in many cases, a vehicle, to fulfill the important role of mentor, tutor, capacity builder, community liaison. The stipend other benefits such as meals and travel support, make this possible. For many volunteers the proposal will reduce their ability to earn beyond 450 hours, a loss of income for an already vulnerable group.

A little about each program: The Foster Grandparent Program has more than 27,000 volunteers volunteering 24 million hours a year as tutors and mentors for over 232,000 children. Teachers report 81% of children matched WITH a FG improved their academic performance. In Portland, Maine, 65% of students at Riverton Elementary are English language learners. Teachers there report Foster Grandparents are the reason these students made significant gains in reading. When you have classes with 25 second grade students, it is impossible for a teacher to spend individual reading time with each student. Riverton's Grandparents, because they volunteer 5-8 hours a day, every day, are making a difference because they are able to spend time, working with and building relationships with these students on a daily basis, resulting in improving reading skills. As the teachers said: We know that if they are proficient readers by 3rd grade, they are more likely to graduate from high school. The President's proposal reduces Foster Grandparent volunteering to just 8.5 hours a week. Reducing the commitment from an average of 25 hours a week to 8.5 runs counter to what we know helps kids learn -- a consistent, reliable, caring mentor.

The Senior Companion Program has more than 13,600 volunteers supporting over 60,00 frail, homebound clients in needing assistance in order to remain living independently. One such client is Julia, an 80-year old woman, who is blind, and was faced with having to leave her home in Rochester, NY due to her inability to get out and complete the tasks of daily living. Her family wasn't always able to be with her because of their work schedules and own family commitments. Julia was matched with a Senior Companion who helped her with grocery shopping and getting to appointments. Her family tells us she was able to stay living at home an additional 5+ years because of the Senior Companion. Considering the cost of long term care the \$4,800 cost for a Senior Companion is quite the savings. There are thousands of Julias, and Julians, around the country, with thousands more on the waiting list, who will be forced to leave their home prematurely if their Senior Companion is no longer available to serve. Now is the time to INCREASE the Senior Companion Program's ability to serve their communities, not decrease.

The RSVP Program has more than 296,000 elderly volunteers contributing 62 million hours of service through 685 projects nationwide. RSVP is a resource for seniors of all income levels who want to volunteer but want a more flexible schedule than FGP or SCP. RSVP's impact is far-reaching -- providing essential client services as well as running local programs such as Bone Builders--an osteoporosis prevention exercise program that is so successful it resulted in this note from a nurse practitioner: My patients have improved bone density scans. They have better balance stamina and strength. They are better informed of their health. The class is a perfect example of prevention at work and exactly the

direction the country needs to take as we tackle the health care crisis. Prevention saves lives and saves health dollars. The proposal eliminates 2/3 of the current volunteers.

And finally, Senior Corps is a lifeline for its volunteers. Multiple studies have proven what Fran Seeley, a 73 year old widow says about her role --- volunteering has given me a reason to get up in the morning, I am needed, I am a contributing member of my community.