

**Testimony of Ginger Mihalik**

**Outward Bound**

**Executive Director, Baltimore Chesapeake Bay Outward Bound School**

**on**

**“Outdoor Recreation: Vast Impact of the Great Outdoors”**

**before the**

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce**

**Subcommittee on Digital Commerce and Consumer Protection**

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**Summary of Key Points**

- Outward Bound USA is playing a key role in recognizing the power of the wilderness as a classroom and a catalyst for economic and educational growth and opportunity for students of all ages and backgrounds.
- Outward Bound provides a wilderness program model for Veterans which helps to increase overall mental health, interpersonal relations, resilience, sense of purpose, and greater interest in personal growth. Together we believe these qualities can help reintegrate Veterans into productive civilian lives. We have partnerships with the VA's Brain Trust and Veterans Centers across the country to both be a resource for Veterans and provide our Veterans with a stronger framework to support positive civilian reentry.
- Outward Bound recognizes the opportunity to provide a profoundly healing experience relevant to the lives of young people coping with the death of a loved one. Outward Bound for Grieving Teens connects young people and together they build off a shared foundation and learn coping and support skills to set them up for success.
- Outward Bound has a national reach to over 40,000 students annually and a network of more than 1 million alumni. These participants have experienced Outward Bound and are positioned to become advocates for and economic drivers in the outdoor industry.
- Numerous studies and research on the Outward Bound model prove that participants report positive growth in areas such as leadership, service, and confidence. We believe these outcomes run parallel to markers of success long-term in areas of economic gains such as employability and in overall personal and professional growth.
- Outward Bound provides scholarships to more than 6,000 students each year: in 2016, we granted more than \$7 million in funds. These funds allow us to provide the Outward Bound experience to many underserved communities across the country, bringing our core values of Character, Leadership, and Service to youth in need.

**Written Testimony of Ginger Mihalik of Baltimore Chesapeake Bay Outward Bound School**

Thank you, Chairman Latta and Ranking Member Schakowsky for holding this hearing today, and good morning to all the members of the committee. It is an honor to be before you today. My name is Ginger Mihalik and I am the Executive Director of the Baltimore Chesapeake Bay Outward Bound School. My school is one of the 11 regional schools in the national Outward Bound network. Today I'm proud to represent Outward Bound USA, and the work we do across the country to fulfill our mission of changing lives through challenge and discovery. At Outward Bound, we use the wilderness classroom to provide unparalleled opportunities for discovery, personal growth, self-reliance, teamwork, and compassion. We believe that physically and mentally challenging experiences, when facilitated by trained professionals in a safe and supportive environment, can help students discover and develop their strength of character, ability to lead, and desire to serve. We believe that reflection is as important as action in developing skills and learning from experience. We respect the diverse capabilities and talents of each individual and are dedicated to helping all students discover their true potential. Since its founding in 1941, Outward Bound has served individuals of all ages and backgrounds through challenging learning expeditions focused on character development, leadership and service. Outward Bound is the leading outdoor education and experiential learning nonprofit. I believe we share a belief with this subcommittee that outdoor recreation can teach a set of values including compassion, integrity, excellence, inclusion, and diversity.

Our national network of regional schools delivers programs which include Outward Bound Veterans, Outward Bound Classic Wilderness Courses, In-schools Programs, , and Outward Bound for Grieving Teens – and serve people from all age ranges, economic communities, and backgrounds. We've issued charters to 11 expeditionary learning schools in Colorado, California, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. NYC Outward Bound Schools also works with many New York City

public schools to deliver customized programs around the themes of team-building and character/leadership development.

Through Outward Bound experiences, students learn important skills and values that they will take with them for the rest of their lives. Our programs aim to:

- Provide engaging relevant, sequential experiences that promote skill mastery and incorporate reflection and transference.
- Promote learning from success as well as failure.
- Use unfamiliar settings to impel students into mentally, emotionally, and physically demanding experiences.
- Create a supportive environment that fosters physical and emotional safety, and a caring and positive group culture.
- Help students develop **Character**, demonstrating increased self-confidence and self-actualization, as well as compassion toward others.
- Build **Leadership** skills, demonstrating the ability to set goals, and inspire and guide others to achieve them.
- Develop students' ability to collaborate, communicate, solve problems and resolve conflicts effectively.
- Create an environment of **Service**, demonstrating social and environmental responsibility, and actively engaging in service to others.

### **OUTWARD BOUND VETERANS**

Outward Bound offers 6-7 day wilderness courses at no cost to 600 veterans per year returning from recent conflict zones. Since 1983, we have helped thousands of returning service members and military veterans readjust to life at home through the healing power of the wilderness and by reinforcing the gratification, confidence, and self-worth that comes with

working within a group. These courses build the skills necessary to successfully return to life after service.

Wilderness activities are used as metaphors for daily life experiences in the pursuit of individual and group excellence, illuminating how the support and collaboration needed to meet goals can positively impact participants' interactions with others at home. Whether whitewater rafting, backcountry mountaineering, kayaking, or sailing, expeditions center on teamwork and challenge. Instructors present sequential activities that gradually increase in both physical and emotional challenge while transferring leadership over to the veteran participants. They emphasize camaraderie and shared life experiences through facilitated conversations about challenges veterans face transitioning to civilian life. Outward Bound Veterans expeditions provide the sense of purpose, trust in one another, and physical challenge that our service men and women experienced in the military. As they work as a group to overcome shared obstacles and achieve shared goals in a non-combat wilderness setting, many veteran participants say they feel more "at home" than they have in all their time back on U.S. soil.

For many veterans, returning home can be as disorienting and stressful as shipping out. Although they are safely removed from the dangers of war, they are also removed from the routine, the sense of purpose, and camaraderie that their years in the service provided. Experiences in conflict zones can cause veterans to lose touch with their skills, to lose confidence in themselves, and to disengage from the very families, communities, and businesses that welcome them home. For those veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress, psychological injuries, and debilitating depression, the return home may be the greatest challenge of all. These men and women possess a wealth of highly valued leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills coupled with a strong sense of service and community.

Suicides among both active service members and veterans continue to rise each year, and have tragically reached historic and unprecedented numbers. Among service members and

veterans who have returned from conflict zones, there is extensive evidence of depression, drug and alcohol abuse, failed marriages, and unemployment. The results of a recent study at University of Texas show that the Outward Bound Veterans treatment model helps to increase overall mental health, interpersonal relations, resilience, sense of purpose, and greater interest in personal growth. Many returning veterans are reticent to seek help through traditional mental health avenues, and Outward Bound Veterans has proven to be a therapeutic alternative.

The demographics of our students mirror that of the military as a whole. In 2016, we served 553 participants on 47 veterans' specific courses in wilderness areas spread throughout the country. 15% were female and 85% were male. Of our students, just over 40% were actively seeking treatment for mental health challenges directly related to their service (21% PTS, 14% Depression, 5% Adjustment Disorder.) On average, 92% of participants are post-9/11 veterans. We are also evaluating how our Veterans program can work with the existing and expanded framework of the VA and Veterans Centers across the country: in early 2017, we completed a whitepaper highlighting our successful findings with a program with the Vet Center in Bakersfield, CA and the VA in Austin. Our paper proposes a national pilot program for an additional 1,500 veterans over the next two years.

*"My Outward Bound experience probably saved my life." – Michael, US Army, Afghanistan Veteran, one year after*

## **OUTWARD BOUND SCHOOL PROGRAMS**

Several Outward Bound schools across the country offer in-school programs for underserved urban youth teaching Outward Bound's core curriculum of leadership skills, teamwork, and personal values through hands-on experiential learning. Many Outward Bound schools combine in-school activities with outdoor programs, building on classroom teachings and reinforcing academic content in a hands-on approach using the natural world to connect academic learning

with the social and emotional skills necessary for success in school, in their communities, and in life.

The expeditionary learning model pioneered by Outward Bound is an active, collaborative, and interdisciplinary teaching method that values character development as much as academic achievement. We use learning strategies that spark student motivation and engagement through active roles in the classroom. We develop a culture of learning and teamwork that brings lessons to life and empowers students to be creative, engaged members of a group.

High achievement is defined as more than just high test scores; it also includes strength of character and the contribution that student makes to their community. It includes the ability to think critically, to analyze and synthesize information, to communicate effectively, and to engage and serve the community. It also includes self-discipline, compassion, and integrity. Students receive encouragement to stretch beyond preconceived limits and achieve greater success as an individual and as part of a team.

Teachers participate in ongoing training and professional development, allowing them to share best practices with their peers. The highly personalized nature of the expeditionary learning model allows each teacher to customize their own curriculum to their strengths and passions, enlivening the classroom and helping teachers connect more deeply with students. Teachers also have access to online tools for developing and sharing curriculum, and they participate in local and national seminars and conferences.

We work with schools to develop custom programs to fit their students' needs. All our programs, whether an hour a week at a partner public school or daily work at one of our expeditionary learning schools, focus on traditional Outward Bound values of character, leadership, and teambuilding. Programs may start in the classroom with activities structured around a discipline or learning outcome and then move to an outdoor component in a city park or wilderness area.

The structure of the program differs from school to school, but all schools offer scholarship support to underserved youth, giving those most in need the opportunity to experience life-changing Outward Bound courses. We serve approximately 25,000 students across the country annually through our in-school programs, with most students from underserved communities.

Skills learned through our renowned leadership development programs prepare students to overcome challenges in daily life, in school, and in potentially dangerous neighborhoods so that they can focus on graduating from high school, attending college and entering the workforce. Students also learn to appreciate and respect the environment through Outward Bound courses.

### **POLICE YOUTH CHALLENGE**

Since 2008, Baltimore Chesapeake Bay Outward Bound School has been working with the Baltimore Police Department and Baltimore City youth to shift negative perceptions they have about each other by pairing them in programming designed to break down barriers and reduce stereotypes. The results of a Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health study (2012-2015), funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, showed that the program is effective in: reducing implicit and explicit bias, reducing social distance, reducing stereotypes leading to a change in behaviors based on internal motivation, increasing self-efficacy and conflict resolution skills, and producing consistent improved classroom behavior. After the unrest in April 2015, Outward Bound worked closely with the Baltimore Police Department to expand the program's reach to serve every active duty officer, school resource officer, police trainees and Command staff.

### **SCHOLARSHIPS**

Outward Bound believes that every student, regardless of ability to pay, should have the opportunity to participate in an Outward Bound course. Thanks to generous donations from



alumni, parents, corporations, foundations and others, Outward Bound's network of regional schools provides financial aid and scholarships to more than 6,000 students each year.

In 2015, Outward Bound USA and its regional Outward Bound Schools granted close to \$6 million in scholarship funding and direct student tuition support. These funds allow us to provide the life-changing Outward Bound experience to many underserved communities across the country, bringing Outward Bound's core values of Character, Leadership, and Service to youth in need.

Outward Bound graduates learn to believe in themselves and to dream big. Through all the challenges that arise on an expedition, they discover that they can do more than they ever thought possible. They return to school, work, or home prepared to serve and committed to lead.

### **OUTWARD BOUND GRIEVING TEENS**

Outward Bound for Grieving Teens is a special program that takes grieving teens and young adults aged 14 - 24 on our outdoor wilderness expeditions. By combining the personal growth methodologies of Outward Bound with a support model that honors the griever, we deliver an intensely profound healing experience relevant to the lives of young people coping with the death of a loved one.

Statistics show that 1.2 million children between the ages of 12 and 17 are grieving the death of one or more parents, and 4.5 million college students have experienced the death of a family member or friend within the last one to two years. Studies also show that children who experience the death of a loved one are two to three times more likely to suffer from depression in their adult years. Only one in seven Americans who lose a parent or sibling before the age of 20 learn to cope with childhood bereavement through programs offered like Outward Bound for Grieving Teens.

Whether it's climbing majestic mountains, rappelling down granite cliffs, or navigating across lakes and through forests, participants discover the strength within to face the challenges ahead. During a transformational seven-day wilderness adventure, participants experience powerful grief work activities woven into the context of the traditional Outward Bound curriculum. This adventure includes hiking, backpacking, or canoeing and a personal challenge day like rock climbing or high ropes. This program is not intended to be counseling or therapy. It is an environment where youth can connect and build supportive relationships with peers going through similar challenges in life. At its essence, it is a wilderness experience combined with grief processing and support activities to learn coping skills and to build an ongoing supportive peer network.

### **EVALUATION, MEASUREMENT, AND OUTCOMES**

Throughout our history, Outward Bound has been studied, evaluated and analyzed by hundreds of academics and research professionals. We evaluate our progress through a continued commitment to both qualitative and quantitative research. For courses 5 days or longer, all students complete a course end evaluation. Students receive questionnaires at three separate times— one week prior to course start, one-week post course, and the third data point is taken one to two months post course. That schedule is anticipated to continue.

Progress is measured through continued research utilizing consistent methodology. The vast majority of participants report that Outward Bound has a positive impact on them in areas such as leadership, service and confidence.

Outward Bound Veterans contracted with the University of Texas in 2012 to complete an in-depth research study with the goal of better understanding the program's impact on veterans. The overall significant results show that the Outward Bound Veterans treatment model helps increase overall mental health, interpersonal relations, resilience, sense of purpose, and greater interest in personal growth, relating to their emotions, and seeking help.

Veterans' anxiety and depression symptoms on average improved by 8.2% and 7.4% respectively. Sense of social connection increased on average by 10% and loneliness decreased by 10.6%. Emotional restriction decreased on average by 13%, attitudes towards seeking psychological help increased by 10%, confidence to use resources to promote personal growth increased by 12.6%, and interest in gaining insight about themselves increased by 19.7%. These results suggest that Outward Bound Veterans provides both interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits for Veterans. This is significant considering the increasing rates of mental health issues among Veterans, particularly issues related to reintegration adjustment, depression, and anxiety/post-traumatic stress. Interpersonal factors, such as loneliness and sense of social connection, and mental health factors, such as depression and post-traumatic stress, are considered critical predictive factors of suicidal ideation.

### ***Additional Outward Bound Research and Program Evaluation***

In 2016, Outward Bound, in partnership with the S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation, began a long-range project on assessing outcomes of Outward Bound programs nationwide and also began to assess potential ways to invest in the quality and retention of our educators. The research component of this special project culled all regional research studies of Outward Bound programs nationwide conducted at institutions like the Susan Crown Exchange, Johns Hopkins, and the Angela Duckworth Lab. It will inform possible next steps in research and the impact and efficacy of Outward Bound's unique approach to teaching and character education.

As part of an ongoing effort to monitor and improve safety, Outward Bound programs are regularly reviewed and audited by both internal and external teams to proactively identify and assess potential hazards as well as areas of commendation. Outward Bound has been a leader in wilderness safety and risk management for 50 years and is a co-presenter of the annual Wilderness Risk Management Conference. This national conference brings together outdoor industry leaders to learn and collaborate with each other to advance safety and risk management in the outdoor education and wilderness adventure community.

Outward Bound instructors are experienced and qualified outdoor professionals committed to their students' well-being through their values, judgment, words, and actions. They are certified as Wilderness First Responders, Wilderness Advanced First Aiders, or the equivalent and meet all Outward Bound, local, state, and federal requirements for their positions. Outward Bound staff are trained to identify, assess, and approach risk as a learning tool, to be managed but not eliminated, with the goal of providing Outward Bound students with the opportunity to gain insights and perspectives into their own and their crew's capabilities that are unavailable anywhere else. Since 1962 over 650,000 students have participated in Outward Bound programs in cities, mountains, deserts, rivers, and oceans. Over the years, and throughout a wide variety of activities, Outward Bound has maintained an excellent safety record.

Looking ahead, there are many opportunities to be leveraged for growth of our students and our economy. Today's society faces challenges: declining economies, high unemployment, low wages, and an erosion of confidence and trust in traditional institutions requires that all of us work together to overcome these challenges. More than ever before, we must find innovative ways to education our youth and instill a sense of purpose, confidence, compassion and a desire to make a positive difference in the world. Now is a time of opportunity, a time to meet the demand for educational experiences that empower and motivate students of every age and background.

Thank you again, Chairman Latta and Ranking Member Schakowsky for the invitation to be here today. I look forward to answering any questions.