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## **Senate Finance Committee Testimony May 10, 2011**

Good morning Chairman Widener and members of the Committee. My name is William Hall and I serve as the Executive Director of the Ohio Community Service Council, which will become known as the Commission on Service and Volunteerism under a language change attached to the budget bill you are considering today. I am extremely pleased that for the first time our agency has the opportunity to present testimony as part of the budget process and hope that through our discussion here this morning you will become much more familiar with who we are, what we do, and the impact of our programming – particularly AmeriCorps – on the citizens of Ohio. We believe that service and volunteerism have traditionally played key roles in solving the challenges facing local communities – these roles become even more pivotal as we continue to face very difficult times. Service can be part of the solution – and this morning we will illustrate how high-impact Council program initiatives are making that happen across the state.

AmeriCorps is the Council's signature program. The AmeriCorps program in Ohio has become one of the strongest in the nation and annually returns millions of federal dollars to the state. In 2010 and 2011 we have awarded \$13.8 million in AmeriCorps sub-grants to 35 local projects focusing on one or more of our priority funding issues: education; health; environmental stewardship; disaster services; veteran or military family support;

and economic opportunity. Every year our AmeriCorps projects provide opportunities for over 600 individuals (called AmeriCorps members) to serve their communities either fulltime or part-time in exchange for a small living stipend and an education award. I will talk more later about the role of AmeriCorps members and impact of the education award on the individual and higher education as a whole in the state of Ohio. But first I want to talk a bit about how AmeriCorps operates, and the role of Council staff in the AmeriCorps program model. It is important to understand that AmeriCorps is local – local organizations engaging local citizens to identify and solve problems they face every day. The Council collaborates with local partners – schools, nonprofits, faith-based organizations – to create programming that meets the unique needs of those individual communities. Not only is the program development and design a collaboration, but so is the investment. AmeriCorps projects are required to leverage local support – both contributions and commitments – to ensure their success. To illustrate, local matching funds for current year AmeriCorps projects total some \$5.2 million. This combination of local program development and investment provides a strong sense of allegiance not seen in other initiatives.

The Council staff has broad responsibilities related to the development, implementation, and evaluation of locally based AmeriCorps programs. Through a comprehensive technical assistance approach, Council staff support organizations in their program development strategies to ensure AmeriCorps is an appropriate fit; provide ongoing and regular technical assistance once a grant is awarded to ensure compliance to grant provisions, but more importantly that progress is being made toward meeting goals and objectives; support in financial management aspects of the federal grant administration; and support of AmeriCorps member development, program directors professional growth, and communication of impact to all stakeholders. As you can see, the administration of

the AmeriCorps programs is much more than awarding the funds to the organizations. The Council takes its responsibility as stewards of public funds very seriously and we work to ensure that such funds are administered according to established guidelines so that they have the highest degree of impact in your community.

Now let me share with you now some examples of our existing AmeriCorps programs. As previously stated, education is a priority funding area for the Council and is demonstrated by a commitment of nearly 50% of our sub-grant portfolio funds. We administer and support programming that covers the entire continuum of the education cycle. AmeriCorps members at OSU's College of Education and Ecology tutor and mentor preschool students so they are better prepared to start kindergarten; last year, 93% of the students participating in the OSU KidCorps program demonstrated an increase in literacy skills based upon pre- and post-testing, as a result of participating in the AmeriCorps program. Our City Year AmeriCorps members continue that trend improving literacy skills of kindergarten thru second grade students; 100% of their elementary level participants demonstrated improved reading skills as measured by the LEARNS assessment. In high school, we focus on supporting first generation and higher risk students in accessing post-secondary education. Ohio College Access Network AmeriCorps members assist school personnel, families and students in exploring opportunities, navigating applications and preparing for that all-important first year. Last year, more than 29,000 high school students participated in individual and group mentoring provided by this vital program with locations in Lorain, Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, Marietta and Xenia.

AmeriCorps members build capacity within the organizations in which they serve – providing the necessary human resources to build local infrastructure and get things done in local communities. In our new program hosted by AMVETS Career Center, AmeriCorps

members assisted 40 veterans in securing employment and safe, affordable housing – in the first quarter of the first year of the grant. At Children’s Hunger Alliance, AmeriCorps members are taking on the issue of childhood obesity with a curriculum that engages young people in nutrition education and physical activity; 75% of the children completing these programs have increased their cardiovascular endurance. And, at Ohio University’s ComCorps program, AmeriCorps members conducted over 14,000 health screenings for lice, vision, hearing and immunizations – providing early detection and necessary resources to keep young people healthy, increasing school attendance rates and improving academic performance. As you all know, early detection through these screenings helps ensure that the young person and their family receive the appropriate support mechanisms so their child may be successful in school.

Behind every strong AmeriCorps program are dedicated AmeriCorps members – more than 600 of them each year -- who are responsible for producing the impacts we boast about. Since the start of this program year, members have already served over 360,000 hours improving Ohio communities. Serving full or part-time in community initiatives throughout the state, a member’s primary goal is always to improve the communities in which they serve with a secondary goal of their own personal and professional development. As the cost associated with attending a college or university continues to increase, more individuals are turning to national service as one option to assist with those expenses. A fulltime AmeriCorps member can earn an education award of \$5,350 to pay for future educational expenses or to payoff qualified student loans. And individuals age 55 and older may transfer their education award to a qualified dependent.

The AmeriCorps education award is not only a good deal for the AmeriCorps member – it is a good deal for the higher education institutions in Ohio. Since its inception in 1994,

more than \$60 million in education awards have been earned by Ohio AmeriCorps members. High quality national service opportunities provide an option for recent college graduates and other individuals at life transition points to remain in Ohio, provide valuable service to their local communities and continue their professional development. We see it every day. Applications for AmeriCorps positions have more than tripled in the last three years. People want to serve and we want to develop the programs that will allow them to serve most effectively.

The Council is more than AmeriCorps, and through our ServeOhio initiative we also play a major role in supporting civic engagement throughout the state. The Council can and must serve as a convener and catalyst for change through the engagement of community volunteers. A recent external analysis of our stakeholders indicated that they want the Council to play an even larger role in shaping policy on service and volunteer issues; building organizational capacity and leveraging resources; and providing technical assistance to local organization staff on the expansion of civic engagement initiatives.

Earlier this month we hosted a strategic dialogue – *Strengthening Volunteer Engagement in Ohio* – where more than 50 individuals representing diverse organizations throughout the state began the conversation about how we raise the importance of volunteerism as a mechanism to solve real societal challenges in our local communities. We also provide leadership in the arena of professional development in the areas of national service, volunteer administration and service learning through the administration of the Ohio Conference on Service and Volunteerism. We promote national days of service – MLK Day, Global Youth Service Day, 9/11 Day of Remembrance, and Make A Difference Day – so communities and groups can engage in projects that are especially meaningful to them.

And, we recognize the efforts of individuals and groups who provide outstanding service and volunteer efforts through the establishment of annual ServeOhio Awards.

The Ohio Community Service Council is a good investment for the State of Ohio. We bring together federal and local resources to build the capacity of local communities to meet their unique challenges. The Council can continue this work – and expand our initiatives to potentially include expanded AmeriCorps programming, such as Teach for America, Habitat for Humanity, and the National Association of Community Health Centers – provided we can secure adequate state funding to meet federal cost-share requirements and maintain core level operating capacity.

State commissions receive federal operating support on a cost-share basis—one federal dollar for each state dollar—up to a formula-based maximum of \$425,000 for Ohio. States are expected to provide full cost share, as we have done in Ohio in the past. However, under the budget as introduced, the state commitment (GRF appropriation plus residual cash in fund 6240) is less than \$180,000 per year – about 40% of the expected level. The capacity issues raised by this support level are clearly the greatest challenge facing the agency, threatening not only core operations but also access to an expanding pool of potential AmeriCorps support for Ohio projects and initiatives. Operationally, we implemented significant cuts in 2011 in response to our loss of contract funding. Staffing was cut to 6.0 FTEs, down from 9.0 FTEs in 2010. Office space was cut by 45% and other operating costs were pared to reflect the reduced staffing levels. We also sought stop-gap assistance through our federal funding agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service. Through December of this year we are operating under an administrative waiver through which we are receiving \$375,000 in federal operating funds with a state cost-share amount of only \$210,000. Even so, we will need to eliminate

another 1.5 FTE's in FY 2012 under the proposed budget. Maintaining present staffing and operations is the most critical need for additional GRF funding to offset the lost contract revenues.

Strategically, however, it is the loss of AmeriCorps program funding that is the most significant implication of failure to meet the expected federal cost share level. In its correspondence to the Council granting the waiver for 2011, the Corporation stated that it “expects states to support commission activities and can only decrease matching requirements for limited periods” and that the Corporation will “take decreased commission capacity into consideration in making funding decisions for grant applications, such as AmeriCorps Competitive, Volunteer Generation Fund, Capacity-Building and Social Innovation Fund.” Under the Serve America Act these resources are scheduled to increase over the next several years, at a time when local communities are going to be facing severe challenges in delivering services. It is critical that local Ohio communities receive their share of these federal funds to self-solve their most pressing problems. Ohio must continue to provide its full administrative cost share for Council operations in order to make this possible. Our capacity translates to local capacity.

In 2012 our name will change to the Commission on Service and Volunteerism and we will become an independent agency, but our mission will stay the same: To strengthen Ohio communities through service and volunteerism. We will continue our role in improving the quality of life for many Ohio citizens and within many Ohio communities. We will provide access to millions of federal dollars for local programming and nonprofit capacity. In return, thousands of hours of service will be provided – engaging not only AmeriCorps members, but also community volunteers. Put simply, we will continue to empower Ohioans to solve the problems within their communities.

I thank you for the opportunity to share this overview of our agency and would be happy to respond to questions.