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Opening Statement
of
Senator Alan Cranston, Chairman
Subcommittee on Child and Human Development
Committee on Labor and Human Resources

Hearing
on
Amendment No. 1675 and Amendment No. 1678
to
S. 1843

Legislation to Create Presidential Commissions to Study
National Service and Volunteerism

8:45 a.m., March 13, 1980
Room 457 Russell

This morning's hearing has been called to receive testimony on legislation introduced by Senator Tsongas -- Amendment No. 1675 to S. 1843, -- to establish a Presidential Commission to study the desirability and feasibility of creating a national service program. We will also consider Amendment No. 1678 introduced by Senator Durenberger to establish a Presidential Commission to study the effects of current socio-economic conditions on volunteerism in general.

As Chairman of this Subcommittee which has oversight responsibility for the ACTION Agency's domestic volunteer programs and as author of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (Public Law 93-113), and the 1974, 1975, 1976, 1978, and 1979 amendments to it, I have a continuing and deep interest in programs offering opportunities for Americans to volunteer their time, energy, and resourcefulness in helping to meet pressing human needs in our nation.

Many of the problems plaguing our nation today stem in part from the fact that too many Americans feel there exists an unbridgeable gap between themselves and government. Many people feel alienated and incapable of influencing or controlling those systems which affect their lives and communities. In particular, a significant and increasing number of young people feel unable to make any substantial contribution to their community and do not feel a part of nor have any stake in the well-being of the world around them. The same, sadly, can also be said for a great many elderly individuals who feel cut-off and isolated. This feeling of alienation and futility troubles me, for I see in it potential serious problems ahead for tomorrow.

I am a cosponsor and strong supporter of Senator Tsongas' proposal to create a Presidential Commission on National Service. I feel very strongly that the development of broad-based opportunities for volunteer service can offer a way to help bridge the gap between individual citizens and their communities and can help young people and older people find a greater sense of purpose in their lives.

During the first few months of international crisis over the situation in Iran and Afghanistan, an unusual sense of national unity arose throughout the country. But why must it take a national crisis to stir our sense of unity and public purpose? Why should that not be an on-going, permanent part of our lives -- a permanent motivation in our society?

Perhaps what we lack is the proper vehicle. Wide-spread acceptance of and involvement in a national service program could help to foster among all Americans just such a permanent and long-lasting atmosphere of national pride and desire to serve a common cause.

Let me add that my own deep interest in the questions before us today preceded the crises in Iran and Afganistan and the President's subsequent call for registration. I am opposed to registration and to the reinstatement of the draft. I believe both steps are undesirable and unnecessary at this time. My hope is that we will never be forced to resort to them. Although I do not think this morning's discussion should concentrate in any way on these questions, I do want to add one comment about the interrelationship of the issues involved. It is my belief that an important outgrowth of the development of a national service system and the resultant reemphasis of the importance of the role of volunteer service in our society will be a strengthening of our voluntary armed forces. I believe this potential relationship is an important reason to explore further the development of a national service program, but it is certainly not the sole reason, nor should it be the overriding reason, for such exploration.

I also want to reiterate my own personal view that any national service program which is developed must be a voluntary -- not a mandatory -- program and that volunteer opportunities under such a program should be made available to Americans of all ages.

Americans are a caring, compassionate people. This quality has been demonstrated time after time in the past when the call for service has been made. A national service program might well provide both the stimulus and the opportunity that Americans need to demonstrate, once again, the compassion and the generosity that have contributed to our nation's greatness. It could create anew that sense of unity and purpose which has bound our diverse population together in years past and which seems to be missing today except in times of immediate crisis.

The concerns underlying Senator Durenberger's proposal -- how today's labor market trends and federal policies affect volunteerism in general -- certainly must be considerations in examining how, and if, a national service system should be structured. Several of our witnesses this morning will focus their attention primarily on the Durenberger amendment.

With this having been said, I'd like to welcome this morning's witnesses. Our lead-off witnesses will include Senators Tsongas and Durenberger and Senator Pell, who is a strong supporter of the national service concept. In addition, we will hear from Members of the House of Representatives who have introduced legislative proposals relating to national service.

Representatives of the Administration will present their views on the legislation before us today and will discuss programs under their respective agencies which could be a part of a national service system. We will also hear from witnesses on why they believe creation of a national service program would be desirable as well as those who feel it would not be desirable.

And finally, we will hear from representatives of projects that could serve as models for a national service program and from participants in those programs.