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### **Priority Number One: Public Service**

This past Tuesday, President Obama gave his first address to a joint session of Congress. In this speech he highlighted the value of public service, demonstrating his commitment to renewing its spirit across the nation. Advancing various forms of public service has been among President Obama's top priorities. In fact, during his Inauguration he hosted a "National Day of Service" calling on Americans across the country to take part in serving their communities. Public service and volunteerism is also among the top priorities of the Democrats of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. The morning following the President's address the Committee on Education and Labor hosted a hearing entitled "Renewing American through National Service and Volunteerism." This Full Committee Hearing focused on strengthening civic engagement and increasing the number of public and community service opportunities for Americans, young and old alike.

Our distinguished panel of witnesses was comprised of an array of individuals from all walks of life who have dedicated themselves to serving their communities. Dr. Cheryl Dorsey, a social entrepreneur and President of Echoing Green, used her own award from the organization to start a mobile health unit serving the residents of inner-city Boston. Van Jones, the founding president of Green for All, is an advocate of the green economy and the

pathway out of poverty that it can provide to underserved communities. Entertainer Usher Raymond IV used his success to establish Usher's New Look Foundation, an organization that provides talented and at-risk youth to the business side of the sports and entertainment industry. Also present was James Harris, a nineteen year old community college student, an aspiring entrepreneur and former Camp New Look participant. Each and every witness was dedicated to the ideals and values of service, using their talent and expertise to engage with and better their communities. Their testimonies offered a unique insight into the continuum of public service, providing law makers with the information necessary to create national policy that would support the efforts of groups, programs, and organizations across the country in their efforts to serve the public good.

As I sat among the many individuals in attendance at the hearing, I couldn't help but be inspired to the call of public service. According to Mr. Raymond, my generation is that of Generation - S or Generation Service. My generation is one seeking to be active and involved, yet lacks the tools and support to do so. In his testimony he described the thousands of youth that his foundation serves. The one thing that so many of them shared was talent and drive, yet they all lacked the opportunity to use that personal fire to positively impact their individual lives and the lives of those around them. Though these youth sought the chance to become active in their communities, more often than not they never got that chance. Through his work with the New Look Foundation he is seeking to provide youth with the opportunity to serve. Mr. Raymond called on the Committee to create legislation that will reach into our nation's communities, particularly those that are underserved, and support programs seeking to change the perception of public service. For too many youth, public service is not seen as a chance to improve oneself and others, it is seen as a sentence for a transgression. This results

in youth viewing service not as a pathway to prosperity, but a reminder of something more negative. Mr. Raymond seeks to alter that perspective by offering youth the opportunity to participate in service-learning programs like those provided by the New Look Foundation.

In evidence of the possibilities of public service was Mr. James Harris. This young man, just several years younger than myself, stood before the Committee to share his experience and the positive impact that service had in his life. He described his presence before the Committee as testimony to a dream. As a Camp New Look participant he was provided the opportunity to think past his circumstances and environment. His eyes were opened to a much bigger world beyond his hometown walls, leaving him inspired to blaze a new life trail. Mr. Harris described the numerous young adults just like him, those burning with a passion for more, but severely limited by the negative environment that surrounds them. From my seat in the audience, Mr. Harris exemplified the power of public service.

The testimony of Mr. Raymond resonated deeply with me because of my own experience with public service. Through my participation in service-learning programs as a youth I was taught the values and ideals of service. I was shown through experience the power that I have to positively impact the lives of those in my community. Lessons of leadership and character imparted a deep respect of my fellow human beings, while inspiring a spirit of understanding of those different from me. My experience working as a young public servant afforded me with the opportunity to grow into a leader with aspirations of affecting change for my community. This aspiration has brought me to Washington D.C., seeking experience in the field of public policy so that I may one day be able to create legislation that will provide for the betterment of communities just like mine across our country.

Public service is empowering, it is engaging, and it has the power to renew America. Leaders in public service can emerge from every community and from any sector in society. Based on my experience and what I have experienced in my own life and during my time as intern on the Committee, I believe that public service is a pathway to economic and social recovery. Through federal legislation that supports programs providing service opportunities communities can unite under the banner of mutual improvement and betterment. Service-learning programs like those of Americorps can re-engage youth isolated and disconnected from their communities and societies. Green service programs can provide dislocated workers and unskilled young adults with the chance to acquire important skills in budding green industries. In addition to increasing the number of public service opportunities available, federal legislation can support the expansion of social entrepreneurship programs so that service program ideas can be made into a reality. Through ventures such as these, bright service-minded individuals can channel their entrepreneurial spirit and energy into important causes dedicated to the improvement of society. Beyond this, federal legislation focused on public service can also provide incentives to the private sector. The responsibility for renewing the spirit of service in this country belongs to more than those just in Washington. Through incentive programs the private sector could step into a bigger and more active role in supporting public service programs. With more funding for existing and new organizations and programs, the number of service opportunities will continue to grow and support communities across the country.

Serving as an intern to the Committee at a time when they are making public service a key federal legislative priority is exciting. Each day at work I am the center of it all, surrounded by individuals championing the causes and interests of their communities. As

programs that provide young adults with the chance to engage with their communities and society take center stage on the hill, my work is contributing to the enshrinement of public service values in legislation that will affect Americans across the country. Like Usher described in his testimony to the Committee- people everywhere want to get involved; they want to contribute to their communities- they simply need the opportunity. Through my very own career in public service I hope to build on work so that all individuals who desire that opportunity can attain it.