



Formerly Green Thumb

Administration on Aging
Listening Session on the Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act
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Testimony on the Employment of Older Americans
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Experience Works is a national, charitable, community-based organization whose mission is to improve the lives of older people through employment, community service and training. Originally named Green Thumb and chartered in 1965 as a small, rural demonstration program, Experience Works has grown to be the nation's leading provider of training, employment, and community service for low-income older Americans. As such, Experience Works is uniquely qualified to speak to the importance of reauthorizing the Older Americans Act, and strengthening those supports and services under the Act that help this country's older citizens secure and keep the jobs upon which more and more have come to depend.

Last year, through the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) authorized through Title V of the Older Americans Act, Experience Works provided training and community service employment opportunities for approximately 29,000 unemployed people age 55 and over whose income was at or below 125% of the Federal poverty level. Those we served had multiple barriers to employment, including low literacy levels, disabilities, homelessness, and being out of the workforce for an extended length of time. This year, as our nation struggles to recover from the recession, we are facing extraordinary demands for our services, and project that we will serve 30,500 people in the thirty states (and Puerto Rico) in which we operate our SCSEP programs.

As Director of the Experience Works state program here in Texas, I know firsthand how valuable SCSEP is as a tool to help unemployed older people who are low income or at risk of becoming low income. We have helped thousands of older Texans to find work that contributes to their community and leads them down a path to permanent employment. Older workers who have participated in SCSEP here in Texas and across the country have contributed millions of hours of community service, while serving thousands of local faith- and community-based organizations. Besides helping these people achieve self-sufficiency, SCSEP also provides an economic boost to their communities through wages earned and other direct services provided to such places as senior centers, schools, and health and veterans facilities. This community service improves the quality of life for all of us.

In addition to the economic benefits of SCSEP, the program provides older people the opportunity to continue to be productive and active, which leads to better health, increased longevity, and the feeling that they are still valued and important members of their communities. As the only federally funded employment program for low-income persons 55 or older, SCSEP is an essential part of the Older Americans Act (OAA) and an important vehicle for those older Americans most in need to learn new skills, contribute to their community and obtain gainful employment.

Congress has long recognized the importance of community service employment for older Americans. During the 2006 OAA Reauthorization, Congress affirmed the dual purpose of SCSEP by adding a Sense of Congress, Section 516, to the OAA, which read:

It is the sense of Congress that – (1) the older American community service employment program described in this title was established with the intent of placing older individuals in community service positions and providing job training; and (2) placing older individuals in community service positions strengthens the ability of the individuals to become self sufficient, provides much-needed support to organizations that benefit from increased civic engagement, and strengthens the communities that are served by such organizations.

Because of the aging of the population and the recent economic crisis that has so negatively affected older Americans, the need for a program like SCSEP has never been greater. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were nearly two million unemployed workers age 55 and older as of January 2010, an increase of 31 percent since November 2008 and the *highest number of unemployed workers in this age group since the Bureau of Labor Statistics has kept age-specific records*. Many of these people have not only lost jobs, but also their dreams of retirement and security.

As unemployment rises, these older workers face unprecedented challenges and barriers when looking for a job because of their age, the need for re-training, and the increased competition for the jobs that are available. With the nation's population continuing to grow older and the 55-to-74 year old cohort projected to increase by an estimated 47 percent over the next decade, SCSEP will be critical for meeting the needs of this country's most vulnerable older workers.

During the reauthorization process for the Older Americans Act, Congress will have the opportunity to examine how some policies have contradicted the intent and the purpose of SCSEP, and create a program that more fully serves the increasing needs of disadvantaged older Americans and their communities. To accomplish this, we recommend the following actions:

- Strengthen and expand Older Worker Programs so that they have a bigger impact on employment and training services for the fastest growing segment of the population.
- Maintain the \$825 million level of funding for SCSEP at a minimum, to meet the growing needs of older individuals and communities in light of demographic, social, and economic challenges of the future.
- Eliminate durational limits for SCSEP. In this uncertain economic climate, participants in SCSEP should be allowed to remain on the program rather than be subject to the maximum time extension they would be permitted in the current law.

- Recommend that Department of Labor interim and proposed regulations to implement the 2006 law not be considered during reauthorization. These regulations do not reflect the intent of Congress and impede the effectiveness of SCSEP for older Americans and local communities.
- Develop performance requirements based on the population served by SCSEP. These would include using different definitions such as: placement rate rather than entered employment; earnings gain rather than average earnings; and a community service measure that reflects the value of community service rather than the number of hours worked by participants.
- Further strengthen the community service mission of SCSEP to maintain community service as a core performance requirement, and ensure that the measure reflects its true value in communities.
- Establish service options that respond to a range of individual circumstances and goals. For example, include provisions for a *community service only* goal for participants when community needs will be furthered and/or employment is not a feasible goal for the participants. Conversely, for those participants who *only need customized employment services* provided by SCSEP to become employed, they should be permitted to take advantage of only those services they need.
- Expand services by implementing the OAA *Section 502(e) – Pilot, Demonstration, and Evaluation Projects* to provide new services for SCSEP participants as well as assisting those who are poor but do not quite qualify for SCSEP.
- Create a competitive grant making process that ensures efficiency, fairness, and minimal disruption to customers and is based on experience and performance. Grantees that meet performance expectations should not have territories disrupted every four years, which results in a decrease in services to older workers, at least for the first full year after competition. Absent unusual circumstances, grantees should not be awarded territories for which they have not applied and do not have expertise to serve.
- Provide clarification and streamline the law to eliminate the complicated data validation and data collection requirements. Current data collection requirements result in complicated procedures, which place an inordinate value on compiling information rather than on customer focused service delivery.
- Support the administration of SCSEP through employment and training administrative funds rather than reducing grants to cover the cost of administration.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments on the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act and the importance of the community service employment program for older Americans contained with Title V of the Act. We look forward to working with other stakeholders throughout this process.