

**Statement of Tony Sarmiento, Senior Service America Inc.**  
**Corporation for National and Community Service**  
**Implementation of the Serve America Act**  
**Public Listening Session**  
**May 22, 2009 - Boston, MA**

My name is Tony Sarmiento and I am executive director of Senior Service America. We are one of 18 national organizations funded by the US Department of Labor to operate the Senior Community Service Employment Program (known as SCSEP), and one of the original six sponsors.

SCSEP is a major program of the Older Americans Act first launched during the War on Poverty. Today it is found in early every county. Each year, SCSEP enables over 90,000 low income older adults – 70% of whom are women, nearly half minority, and all below 125% of the poverty guideline -- to provide over 46 million hours of paid community service in local agencies such as libraries, museums, senior centers, and schools. We know that the work of these older adults is making a difference. In an independent survey of a national sample of 10,000 host agencies, over two-thirds reported that SCSEP participants increased their capability to provide services.

Our current economic crisis has exacerbated the range and scale of unmet needs in our increasingly diverse and aging society. This situation calls for an unprecedented level of coordination and collaboration between the Corporation and its grantees and SCSEP and its 900 grantees and subgrantees. Based on our own recent survey of our 80 subgrantees in 16 states, it appears that there's more coordination at the local level than at the national and state level. We would like to work with the Corporation to build a stronger connection at every level.

And I think the Corporation will find a more enthusiastic partner at the Department of Labor when Jane Oates, a former longtime staff member of Senator Kennedy, is confirmed as Assistant Secretary for the Employment and Training Administration.

Let me conclude by citing Marc Freedman's 1994 study for the Commonwealth Fund, "Seniors in National and Community Service." When Freedman evaluated several SCSEP grantees, he was troubled to find that most "currently treat service as a means toward the far more exalted end of unsubsidized employment—an approach that stands in sharp contrast to those of efforts like the Foster Grandparents Program... In those programs, service is regarded as an end in itself, and a noble one at that." He concluded that SCSEP "might benefit from reexamination and revamping" and that ultimately, "a change in perspective would likely be required to raise the status of service" within SCSEP.

In my opinion, Freedman's assessment of SCSEP fifteen years ago remains valid today. The prior Administration undervalued SCSEP's community service mission, even after the Congress reauthorized the Older Americans Act in 2006 and included new language reaffirming SCSEP's civic engagement and community service purposes.

President Obama and his administration have the opportunity to take a different approach. We can implement the Kennedy Serve America Act and the Older Americans Act informed by a new vision, a vision of older adults – including those who are too often stereotyped because of their race, income, and gender – a vision of older adults as untapped assets, as valuable resources in their community.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit comments.