

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 4, 2012

Ms. Wendy Spencer
Chief Executive Officer
Corporation for National and Community Service
1201 New York Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20525

Dear Ms. Spencer,

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has experienced dramatic increases in enrollment over the last 10 years. In 2002, there were approximately 19.1 million SNAP participants a month. Today, that number is 46.6 million participants.¹

We recognize that a number of factors have contributed to the growth in SNAP participation. One factor might be the exemption of certain Corporation for National Community Service (CNCS) stipends from income, and the role CNCS has played in encouraging AmeriCorps volunteers to take advantage of the statute in a way that seems outside the spirit of the law.² Therefore, we would appreciate your response to a number of questions regarding the role CNCS plays in structuring or advising your volunteers on the eligibility process for SNAP.

CNCS's primary mission is to facilitate volunteer programs, often in exchange for a stipend paid to the participants. This stipend, referred to as a "modest living allowance"^{3,4} is paid in exchange for a commitment to volunteer for one year at a nonprofit organization, local government agency, state government agency, or other eligible locations.

In addition to the stipend, Congress allowed program participants who were previously receiving SNAP benefits to continue to receive their benefits along with their CNCS stipend. The Congressional intent behind this provision was to ensure that program participants would not be forced to choose between SNAP benefits and participating in CNCS programs. Unfortunately, it appears that participation in this small carve-out has grown exponentially, potentially distorting the cost of the CNCS programs and raising questions about whether CNCS actively played a role promoting the exploitation of this carve-out in order to allow program participants to double-dip into both the CNCS stipend and the SNAP program.

For example, in Montana, an official state government website contains the following advice for potential VISTA program participants in response to the question, "Should I

¹ Historical monthly SNAP participation data are from USDA and participation projectors are from CBO.

² 42 U.S.C § 12637(d) for AmeriCorps*State and National and 42 U.S.C. §§ 4951-4960 AmeriCorps*VISTA

³ <http://www.americorps.gov/about/programs/vista.asp>

⁴ http://www.americorps.gov/for_individuals/choose/state_national.asp

apply for food stamps?": "Oftentimes, some VISTA feel guilty about applying for food stamps....While the questions is that only you can answer for yourself...(m)any members receive full-benefits and speak of the value of learning how the public benefits' (sic) system works, along with learning what it's like to use food stamps at a grocery store...If you do plan on applying for food stamps, do so ASAP. If you're receiving benefits before your official start date, then your VISTA stipend will not count as income... You can (and it is highly encouraged) that you apply and become eligible in your local community and then transfer your benefits."⁵

In addition, a number of AmeriCorps State Program Director Handbooks address how becoming a volunteer might impact SNAP benefits. Indeed, the Minnesota and Iowa handbook provides a prescreening tool on eligibility.⁶

Instructions like these raise concerns regarding the true cost of the CNCS program, the growing cost of the SNAP program due to the dramatic increase in SNAP program participation, and most importantly, CNCS's potential role in what appears to be a deliberate effort to game SNAP program eligibility rules and use the program improperly to provide "learning" opportunities for VISTA volunteers rather than feeding hungry Americans.

Please answer the following questions and provide the documents requested by January 15, 2013:

1. Does CNCS keep track of the number of program participants who utilize the SNAP program? If not, why? If so, how many CNCS program participants utilized the SNAP program from 2007 to the present?
2. Does CNCS keep track of the dollar amount of SNAP benefits received by CNCS program participants? If not, why? If so, please provide the dollar amount for each year from 2007 to the present.
3. Does CNCS believe that applying for food stamps is a useful "learning" experience for prospective VISTA volunteers?
4. Is CNCS concerned that promoting SNAP program use by VISTA volunteers in order to "(learn) what it's like to use food stamps" is a misuse of the SNAP program?
5. Is CNCS aware that local affiliates are promoting the use of the SNAP program so that VISTA volunteers can "(learn) what it's like to use food stamps at a grocery store?" If so, has CNCS attempted to prevent the use of this language in official materials? If not, why?

⁵ <http://prevention.mt.gov/vista/recruit/faqs.php>. Page last updated June 12, 2012.

⁶ http://conservationcorps.org/storage/access-files/Foodstamps%20Information_3.doc

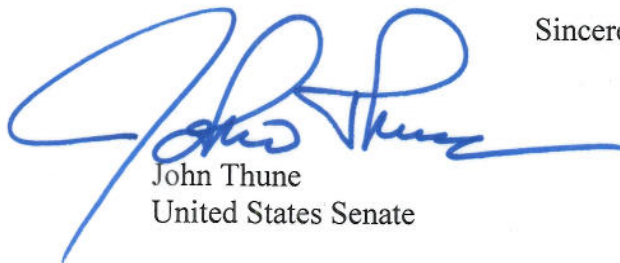
6. Why does VISTA "highly encourage" otherwise ineligible applicants to apply for SNAP benefits?
7. Does CNCS provide SNAP applications to VISTA applicants?
8. Does CNCS use promotion of SNAP eligibility as a recruitment tool?
9. Are VISTA members considered "federal employees" for the purpose of applying for future federal jobs? Do they receive other federal service benefits such as the general retirement system or student plan repayment benefits?
10. Do State Service Commissions and CNCS State Office that operate in the same state overlap in function? What impediments prevent these two offices from combining?

Additionally, please provide documents related to the following requests:

1. Please provide all guidance given to CNCS program recruiters that mentions the SNAP program.
2. Please provide all recruitment materials that mention the SNAP program.
3. Please provide all internal guidance, rules and/or regulations that supports CNCS's decision to "highly encourage" potential volunteers to participate in the SNAP program.

Please provide this information both in hard copy and in an electronic and searchable format to Jane Lucas and William Smith. Questions can be directed to Ms. Lucas at (202) 224-2321 or jane_lucas@thune.senate.gov or Mr. Smith at (202) 224-6308 or william_smith@budget.senate.gov.

Sincerely;



John Thune
United States Senate



Jeff Sessions
United States Senate