



The Honorable Brian Feldman
Chair, Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Maryland General Assembly
2 West, Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Senate Bill 551 - Serving Every Region Through Vocational Exploration (SERVE) Act of 2023 -
Favorable with Amendments

February 22, 2023

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan and Education, Energy & Environment Committee
Members:

Service Year Alliance is pleased to support Senate Bill 551, the SERVE Act, which would create a service year option for Maryland high school graduates. Service Year Alliance is a national nonprofit which seeks to make a service year — a paid opportunity to develop real-world skills through hands-on service — an expectation and opportunity for all young Americans. Our organization supports service year programs across the country with tools and resources to help elevate and expand the service year field. Service years transform lives, offering young people postsecondary pathways into college and career and building talent pipelines into the public and nonprofit sectors. Service years also meet urgent community needs in areas like education, conservation, clean energy, public health, re-entry services, and much more. As Governor Moore expressed in his State of the State address, service years can help to rebuild our country's social fabric, bringing individuals together across lines of difference as the "antidote to loneliness and otherness."

Governor Moore's proposed Service Year Option will make Maryland a model for the country in offering service year opportunities specifically targeted for high school graduates and those who have earned their GED. As outlined, the Service Year Option will offer a host of high-quality benefits and wraparound support services, including compensating participants at \$15 per hour, a post-service stipend, mentoring and networking opportunities with fellow participants across the state, and a flexible schedule to make service an accessible and financially feasible option for those with caregiving and other commitments. This high-quality program design adopts many of the best practices laid out in Service Year Alliance's recent [Equity Agenda for National Service](#) and is necessary in order to equitably expand service years in Maryland and across the country.

Three minor fixes or amendments could help to improve the design and implementation of this innovative service year legislation:

First, we would urge the General Assembly to not recreate the wheel when it comes to building and maintaining an online portal to advertise service year opportunities, as outlined in proposed §24-11A-03 (A) (6). Since 2015, Service Year Alliance has been proud to develop and maintain [ServiceYear.org](https://www.serviceyear.org), a state of the art and mobile-accessible online marketplace that connects young people to service year opportunities nationwide. ServiceYear.org is used by programs and state service commissions across the country, provides a common application so that individuals can easily apply to multiple opportunities, and is powered by a national marketing and awareness campaign backed by years of market research and message testing. ServiceYear.org is the only online platform for service years and could easily be adapted to meet any unique needs of the Service Year Option in Maryland. Giving the new Department of Service and Civic Innovation the flexibility to implement an online portal through internal or external parties would allow the Department to conserve limited resources and leverage existing infrastructure.

Second, the Service Year Option's emphasis on geographic diversity should extend not only to youth participants, but also to participating service year programs and employers to ensure that organizations all across the state can benefit. In §24-11A-03 (A) (2), the General Assembly may want to clarify the role of the regional program leaders, and how these nonprofits will interact with the Department to ensure program quality and consistency across regions, and to avoid duplication.

Finally, the Committee may want to state that the Service Year Option Program Fund is able to accept federal funding sources, including competitive and formula dollars from agencies and accounts like AmeriCorps (formerly known as the Corporation for National and Community Service), U.S. Department of Labor's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and other forthcoming resources from the Inflation Reduction Act and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Sustainably braiding state and federal funds within the new Department of Service and Civic Innovation will help participating service year programs offer high-quality opportunities to Maryland youth and lower administrative burden at the program level. The Department should also consider coordinating with other state Departments, including MD Energy Administration and MD Dept. of Natural Resources, to expand clean energy and climate resilience service year opportunities, replicating [successful state partnerships in Minnesota and elsewhere](#). For more background, please see Service Year Alliance's recent report, [Expanding Service Years in State and Local Communities](#), published jointly with AmeriCorps and America's Service Commissions.

The Committee should also make a clear distinction between employment and service. In statute or regulation, clearly defining service and what kind of activities may qualify as service is critically important, particularly as it relates to participating private employers. Involving the private sector as host organizations can be a useful addition, so long as the legislative intent of what constitutes service and a participant's scope of service is clear and that the placement is

addressing a community need. Federal AmeriCorps resources cannot be leveraged at private, for-profit employers, per statutory requirements. Additionally, the General Assembly should use consistent language to refer to service placements exclusively as service, not as work or employment. This nuance is an important distinction in federal authorizing legislation, and the state may want to adopt similar language, particularly in §24-11A-01 and -04.

The proposed Service Year Option would layer on top of existing service year programming in Maryland, uniquely targeting young people directly out of high school or GED programs and investing in youth at a critical juncture in their personal and professional trajectories. Maryland is fortunate to have a strong existing network of AmeriCorps and YouthBuild programs, as well as several state-funded programs including the Maryland Conservation Corps, the Chesapeake Conservation and Climate Corps, Volunteer MD, and the nascent Maryland Corps. With the addition of the Service Year Option, Maryland is poised to lead the nation in equitable and accessible service year opportunities, building professional on-ramps for youth of all backgrounds and creating talent pipelines into the public sector. For these reasons, we urge the Committee to issue a favorable report with outlined amendments for clarity and flexibility.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this important legislation. With additional questions, please contact Melissa Bender, Director, Government Relations at mbender@serviceyear.org.

Sincerely,

Kristen Bennett
CEO, Service Year Alliance