

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Frederica Wilson (FL-24)

Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

"Examining the Policies and Priorities of AmeriCorps and Its FY 2024 Audit Failure"

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Wednesday, December 11, 2024 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you, Chairman Owens.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today. It's so good to see you again, Michael Smith, and it's a pleasure to meet you, Stephen Ravas. This morning, we are meeting to examine the role of AmeriCorps, a vital force in strengthening communities through service opportunities.

But we can't ignore its financial struggles, which have hindered its mission for years. As a Committee and members of Congress, our responsibility is clear: we must equip AmeriCorps with the resources, oversight, and accountability it needs to succeed. Unfortunately, my colleagues on the other side of the aisle see this as a chance to eliminate AmeriCorps in the name of "government efficiency."

But let's be clear: this isn't about fixing problems for Republicans; it's about playing politics. Despite the financial struggles that AmeriCorps has dealt with for years, Committee Republicans have neglected proper oversight in accordance with House Rules until now, when it is politically convenient for them to do so.

It's downright shameful—and honestly, a bit pathetic—that Republicans are twisting AmeriCorps' financial hurdles, which the agency is already addressing, into an excuse to bully and politicize an organization that stands for the very heart of American democracy.

Despite challenges, AmeriCorps has consistently delivered for Americans. Since 1993, AmeriCorps has provided vital relief to millions of Americans, managing 3,300 projects annually and offering service opportunities to 200,000 members and volunteers. These projects have been crucial to disaster recovery, from rebuilding homes after Hurricane Katrina to delivering water filters during the Flint Water Crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, AmeriCorps supported students, fought food insecurity, aided homebound seniors, and coordinated vaccination clinics—proving itself essential in our nation's recovery.

Additionally, AmeriCorps doesn't just build communities—it builds futures by creating pathways to higher education for thousands of Americans. Members serving in AmeriCorps programs are eligible for education awards to cover the cost of higher education and job training. AmeriCorps members have received over 5 billion dollars to help them pay for college or repay student loans. And let me remind this Committee that fixing the student loan crisis should be one of our many, many goals. If solving the student loan crisis is our mission, gutting a program that does exactly that is downright absurd.

AmeriCorps plays a vital role in the lives of countless Americans, which is why we must acknowledge and help fix its financial challenges. We, as Congress, should be in the business of solving problems, not eliminating vital programs.

Since 2017, AmeriCorps has struggled to implement a strong financial management system, leaving it without the tools to manage grantees or prevent waste and mismanagement properly. The agency's financial hurdles are clear, with seven straight disclaimed audits since [FY 2017] and outdated systems. But these issues are solvable, and Committee Democrats do not take responsibility for overseeing AmeriCorps lightly.

But there's no reason to dismantle an agency that serves millions when the path forward is to invest in the proper oversight and support to get it back on track. To do so would rob Americans of much-needed aid, erase jobs, and set a dangerous precedent of using government oversight as a stick to beat government institutions with instead of a constructive tool to aid them.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on how AmeriCorps plans to work with Congress to ensure strong, continuing oversight and the development of robust improvements to address the agency's ongoing management challenges.

Before I yield back, I want to acknowledge that this is Chairwoman Foxx's final hearing with this Committee.

Thank you, Dr. Foxx, thank you for your years of commitment to students and workers. I met you during my first year on this Committee, and I believe I know your heart.

Thank you, and I yield back.