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**Testimony in Support of the Youth Mentoring Program
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies**

On behalf of MENTOR, our network of Affiliates, and youth mentoring programs across the country, I thank Chairman Cartwright and Ranking Member Aderholt for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of a critical federal investment in America's young people. My testimony will focus on the Part G Youth Mentoring Program housed in the **Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) at the Department of Justice (DOJ)**.

MENTOR and our partners are calling on your committee to continue your bipartisan support of the Youth Mentoring Program with an investment of \$130 million in Fiscal Year 2023. This investment will make it possible for quality mentoring organizations using evidence-based best practices to better meet the mentoring needs of many of our nation's most vulnerable youth.

MENTOR is the unifying national champion for expanding quality youth mentoring relationships and connecting volunteers to mentoring opportunities in their local communities. In a time when 1 in 3 young people are growing up without a mentor, MENTOR seeks to close this "mentoring gap" and ensure our nation's young people have the caring adult support they need to succeed at school, in community, and in the workforce. We seek to leverage resources and provide the tools and expertise that local programs -- whether in schools, nonprofits, faith-based institutions, or the private sector -- require to provide high-quality mentoring for young people who need it most, build greater awareness of the value of mentors, and positively inform public policy in order to bring support and opportunity to young people in need.

I write this testimony on behalf of the thousands of mentoring programs and millions of volunteer adult mentors that serve our communities each day, as well as the millions of young people in the United States still waiting to find the supportive caring adults they need to thrive -- including an average of 63 young people per program on wait lists. I would also like to thank the House Commerce, Justice and Science Subcommittee for its strong history of supporting these critical federal funds for evidence-based mentoring and demonstrating leadership in expanding pathways for young people.

The nation's young people keenly need the support of mentors, especially in light of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in an increased sense of isolation a reduced sense of purpose, and disconnection from key resources and experiences needed for learning and advancement. While we have seen and heard about the incredible resilience of our

nation's young people, recent research shows that nearly 75% of young people feel disconnected from adults and their peers, and more than 50% of young people are much more concerned than usual about their personal and their family's physical and emotional health. Navigating a global pandemic has resulted in millions of young people facing new and intensified barriers to succeeding in school, getting a good job, and engaging productively in their community. These young people continue to need access to consistent adult mentors who will help them experience belonging, identify their purpose, navigate obstacles, and realize their potential.

The Benefits of Quality Youth Mentoring

Youth mentoring is a simple, yet powerful concept: a caring adult provides guidance, support, and encouragement to help a young person achieve success in life. Research confirms that quality evidence-based mentoring relationships have positive effects on young people in a variety of personal, academic, and professional situations. It is a strategic intervention and prevention-based strategy that helps foster positive outcomes for young people from all backgrounds and Zip codes. Mentoring is proven to play an important role in the following areas of support for young people:

- **Reducing Unsafe or Risky Behaviors:** Mentors provide young people with consistent support as they encounter the challenges of navigating their daily lives. They serve as positive examples to help young people make healthy decisions and avoid high-risk behaviors. Young people who meet regularly with their mentors are less likely than their peers to start using illegal drugs and alcohol. Mentoring can also be integrated into multi-component violence prevention and intervention efforts, reduce aggressive behaviors such as fighting, bullying, and delinquency, and provide comprehensive support to youth at risk for committing violence or victimization. Recent research funded by OJJDP even found that mentoring programs potentially provide a benefit of three times the public expenditure for every day in jail that program participants avoid. Mentors help provide guidance to productive activities that support growth and development in a young person, such as sports and extracurricular activities.

Workforce Development: Mentoring helps develop the talent pipeline for our economy by preparing young people for the workforce through career exposure, 21st century skill-building, social-emotional support, and goal setting. It can also lead to higher retention rates, wage increases, and professional development. Through their mentors, young people are introduced to resources and organizations they may not be familiar with, providing them with new networks as well as methods to find jobs and internships. Mentors in workplace settings are particularly impactful for marginalized young people, such as youth with disabilities, youth of color, and youth identifying as female, who are often underrepresented in certain industries, such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

Educational Achievement: Students who are chronically absent or disengaged are more likely to fall behind academically, particularly in reading, more likely to have behavioral issues and more likely to drop out of school. Mentoring is a proven, evidence-based

strategy to increase school engagement and improve scholastic efficacy and school-related misconduct. As an example, young adults who face an opportunity gap but have a mentor are 55 percent more likely to be enrolled in college than those who did not have a mentor.

Social Emotional Development and Mental Health: Mentoring provides young people with a sense of belonging and promotes positive social attitudes and relationships. In fact, research has shown that the strongest benefit from mentoring, and most consistent across risk groups, is a reduction in depressive symptoms. It can also help reduce mental health stigma and increase treatment entry and adherence. These benefits serve as building blocks for engagement in positive activities, increased school participation and improved attitudes.

Mentoring ultimately provides the much-needed social support, increased positive relationships, life skills training, and access to networks to young people who need support – helping to lead them to positive and productive futures.

Closing the Mentoring Gap

While mentoring is an effective evidence-based intervention and prevention strategy for young people facing risk, mentoring organizations across the nation still face barriers in providing high-quality mentoring services. Thousands of young people remain on waitlists at organizations because of limited resources and funding for programs. Inflationary costs and workforce shortages have prevented a full recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many programs also lack the training and technical assistance that could bolster their mentoring programs to better support young people. These issues combined have provided many obstacles for mentoring programs. But with the support of both private and public funds, mentoring organizations have increased capacity to be able to meet their community's relational needs.

One of the ways that mentoring programs have succeeded in expanding quality services is through support from the Youth Mentoring Program. The program, which touches every state, focuses on prevention and interventions for youth facing risk and helps mentoring programs as they work to close the mentoring gap. **These funds go directly to providing support for some of our country's most disadvantaged young people, who without these kinds of interventions could become involved in negative behaviors and activities causing harm to themselves, their communities, and which take an economic toll.**

Mentoring programs are able to effectively and safely serve young people when they are fully trained on the most up to date mentoring evidence and training. In 2015, through funds from the Youth Mentoring Program, The National Mentoring Resource Center (NMRC) was created to improve the quality and effectiveness of mentoring by supporting youth mentoring programs and practitioners. MENTOR and our Affiliates provide free mentoring tools, program and training materials and no-cost, evidence-based technical assistance to mentoring programs, school districts, nonprofits and faith-based institutions across the nation through the NMRC. **This important resource has bolstered the ability of mentoring programs to serve young people**

from vulnerable populations, including young people at-risk of entering the juvenile justice system, youth in foster care, and victims of commercial sex trafficking.

In a 2016 study conducted by MENTOR it was found that 75 percent of programs have a budget of under \$100,000. Costs for groups of young people with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as those who have encountered traumatic events, teen parents, or victims of commercial sexual exploitation require more resources and expertise, which increases the program's cost per youth in order to fully address their unique needs. Mentoring programs work far beyond their financial capacity to serve young people, but with additional resources, their reach expands exponentially and the quality of their services can strengthen through improved training. Mentoring programs utilize federal support in part to better serve the large number of young people who could benefit most from evidence-based mentoring.

Unfortunately, the Youth Mentoring Program is the only federal grant exclusively dedicated to providing funds for evidence-based mentoring. **Youth Mentoring Program funds have been awarded to national, multi-state and collaborative mentoring projects and programs who serve suburban, rural and urban populations. The flexibility of the grant has allowed organizations to use these funds to specifically tailor programs to their community's unique needs. This provides local control and specialized concentration on results that work best for each young person and their community.** These funds also invest in research to learn what is most effective, bridging this research to practice, and driving quality and impact through hands-on community-based capacity building. These funds are simply invaluable in the ways that they affect youth development, educational achievement, and safe communities.

Without adequate funding, mentoring programs do not have access to the resources to ensure young people develop healthy, safe, and productive lives. Strong mentoring programs weave together our communities, drive greater understanding, enrich the lives of both mentors and mentees, and efficiently leverage volunteers to drive impact backed by quality programs.

This request in support of \$130 million for the Youth Mentoring Program will allow more young people to have access to the important social, professional, and academic opportunities we hope to provide for all America's youth. **The Youth Mentoring Program demonstrates a sound and effective investment in evidence-based programs that works and will have definitive and measureable impact on closing the mentoring gap in America.**

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony on this critical federal resource supporting young people.