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**Testimony in Support of the Part G 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 Rogers and Ranking Member Cartwright for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of a critical federal investment in America's young people. I write this 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 relationships they need to thrive – including an average of 63 per program on wait lists. **My testimony will focus on the Part G Youth Mentoring Program managed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) at the Department of Justice (DOJ).** MENTOR and our youth-serving partners are calling on your committee to continue the strong bipartisan support of the Youth Mentoring Program with an investment of at least \$130 million in Fiscal Year 2024. This investment will make it possible for more mentoring organizations to use evidence-based practices to better meet the mentoring needs of our nation's most vulnerable and disadvantaged youth.

MENTOR is the unifying national champion for expanding quality youth mentoring relationships and connecting volunteers to mentoring opportunities in their local communities. At a time when 1 in 3 young people are growing up without a mentor – a data point that has grown in recent years among our country's youngest generation – MENTOR seeks to close this “mentoring gap” and ensure that all young people have the support they need to succeed, everywhere they are. 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 opportunity to young people in need.

Quality mentoring through structured programs or through relationships that form naturally with teachers, coaches, faith leaders, and other caring adults can have a profound positive impact on educational success, healthy development, and overall wellbeing. It is an innovative, evidence-based practice that is one of the few prevention and intervention tactics with the potential to support young people of all demographics and backgrounds in all aspects of their lives. We believe that this critical time in our nation's history requires an approach that considers the inextricable linkage between a young person's academic achievement, mental, social, and physical health. For us to meet this moment, federal

investment into evidence-based programs that support positive youth development is required.

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:

- **Reducing Unsafe or Risky Behaviors:** Mentors serve as positive role models to help young people make healthy decisions and avoid high-risk behaviors. For example, young people who meet regularly with their mentors are less likely than their peers to use illegal drugs and alcohol. Mentoring can also be integrated into multi-component violence prevention and intervention efforts, reduce aggressive behaviors such as fighting and bullying 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. Mentors prepare young people for the workforce through career exposure, skill-building, social-emotional support, and goal setting. Mentoring 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, introducing them to 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:** Many students find meaningful relationships during the school day. In fact, analyses of one prominent national data set from *Applied Developmental Science* suggest that teachers and other school personnel, such as counselors, coaches, or front office and cafeteria staff, are among the most cited sources of mentors. Further, students who are chronically absent are more likely to drop out of school and have behavioral issues. Mentoring can increase school engagement and improve scholastic efficacy and school-related misconduct.
- **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 is a reduction in depressive symptoms. It can also help reduce mental health stigma and increase treatment entry and adherence. Ultimately, mentoring provides pro-social activities, increased positive relationships, life skills training, and access to networks – helping lead young people to productive futures.

Mentoring programs can effectively and safely provide these benefits when they are fully trained on the most up-to-date mentoring evidence-based practice and training. In 2015, through funds from the Part G Youth Mentoring Program, The National Mentoring Resource Center (NMRC) was created to improve the quality and effectiveness of mentoring. MENTOR and its Affiliates provide tools, program and training materials, and no-cost, evidence-based technical assistance to mentoring programs, school districts, workplaces, 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.

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, many mentoring organizations have been able to increase their capacity 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 to close the mentoring gap. These funds provide direct support for young people, who could otherwise become involved in negative behaviors and activities causing harm to themselves, their communities, and which take an economic toll.

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.

The Youth Mentoring Program continues to be 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 research to practice, and driving quality and impact through hands-on community-based capacity building. They are simply invaluable in the ways that they support youth development, educational achievement, and safe communities.

MENTOR's request of \$130 million for the Youth Mentoring Program – supported by well over 400 direct service programs from every state in the country - will allow more young people to access to the important social, professional, and academic opportunities we all hope to provide for America's youth. The Youth Mentoring Program demonstrates a sound and effective investment in evidence-based programs that work. Strong mentoring programs weave together our communities, foster greater understanding, enrich the lives of both mentors and mentees, and efficiently leverage volunteers to drive impact backed by quality programs and practice.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony on this critical federal resource supporting young people and for this subcommittee's long-standing, bipartisan support for the Part G Youth Mentoring Program.