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**Testimony in Support of Youth Development Education Programs
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies**

On behalf of MENTOR, I thank Chairman Aderholt and Ranking Member DeLauro for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of a critical federal investment in America’s young people. I write this on behalf of MENTOR’s Affiliate Network, thousands of mentoring programs, and millions of volunteer mentors that serve our communities each day. I’m also writing on behalf of the millions of young people across the United States still waiting to find the supportive relationships they need to thrive – including an average of 63 youth per mentoring program on wait lists. Specifically, we advocate to expand effective federal programs that promote mentoring and positive youth development in the Departments of Education, Labor, Health & Human Services, and AmeriCorps, including Full-Service Community Schools, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Student Success and Academic Enrichment Grants, Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants, Title I WIOA Youth Programs, Project AWARE, and various national service programs.

MENTOR is the unifying national champion for expanding quality youth mentoring relationships. 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 mentoring programs – whether in schools, nonprofits, faith-based institutions, or the private sector – require to provide high-quality services and relational support for young people who need it most, build greater awareness of the value of mentors, and positively inform public policy to bring opportunity to young people in need.

Quality mentoring through structured programs and relationships that form naturally with teachers, coaches, faith leaders, and other caring adults can have a profoundly 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 and their 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 or near-peer mentor 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:

- 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.
- 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 naturally occurring mentors. Further, students who are chronically absent are more likely to drop out of school, exhibit behavioral issues, and lack a sense of belonging. Mentoring can increase school engagement, improve scholastic efficacy, and prevent misconduct.
- Reducing Unsafe or Risky Behaviors: As protective factors for young people, 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, as it can 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 future economy. Mentors prepare young people for the workforce through career exposure, social capital, 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).

- Special Populations: Mentoring also offers a practical approach to supporting military-connected youth and youth in rural communities. Mentoring for these populations has been shown to improve academic performance and symptoms of depression, improving social support and parental ratings of stress in the home, and improvements in their health.

Closing the Mentoring Gap

Unfortunately, mentoring organizations across the nation still face barriers in providing high-quality mentoring services. Inflationary costs reduced charitable giving, and volunteer and workforce shortages have prevented a full recovery from the pandemic. Many lack the training that could bolster their 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 can increase the capacity to serve every young person in their community.

As you consider the FY25 Labor-HHS-Ed appropriations bill, please consider increasing resources to the following federal programs, which allow for the mentoring movement to grow in schools, workplaces, and communities across the country:

- **The Full-Service Community Schools Program** provides school district grantees with comprehensive academic, social, and health services for students, students' family members, and community members in school settings by integrating existing school and community programs and implementing coordinated strategies that can support and positively impact communities experiencing the effects of concentrated poverty. Grantees of this program may provide services including mentoring and other youth development programs. We call on Congress to fund this program at \$443 million in FY25.
- **The Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program** provides states with funding to support before- and after-school and summer learning programs for students attending high-poverty, low-performing schools. Mentoring services are an allowed activity for this funding. We call on Congress to fund this program at \$2.1 billion in FY25.
- **Student Success and Academic Enrichment Grants (Title IV-A of ESSA)** are a flexible program for states and districts to spend on various projects, including those that support "safe and healthy students," where funding can be used to support mentoring. We call on Congress to fund this program at \$1.6 billion.
- **Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants (Title II-A of ESSA)** is a formula grant that is distributed to improve the quality and effectiveness of teachers, principals, and other school leaders through preparation, training, recruitment, retention, and professional development. Funding from this program can be used by nonprofit organizations to provide technical assistance to school districts to train on, among other topics, having a "mentoring mindset." We call on Congress to fund this program at \$2.4 billion for FY25.

- **WIOA Title I Youth Programs** funding can be used to serve eligible youth who face barriers to education, training, and employment, including youth mentoring and workplace mentoring. We call for maximum funding for this program in FY25, and encourage the Department of Labor and Congress to identify new strategies to direct funding to mentoring programs providing quality workforce development programming.
- **Project AWARE** provides funding to develop infrastructure for school-based mental health programs and services with the purpose of increasing awareness of mental health issues among school-aged youth, provide training for school professionals to help them identify and respond to mental health issues, and connect school-aged youth with necessary services. We call for robust funding for this program for FY25.
- **AmeriCorps programs** strengthen the capacity of the nonprofit and public sectors to address unique local needs and save taxpayer dollars. In FY25 we call on this committee to provide the highest possible funding for AmeriCorps.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony on this critical federal resource supporting young people. Feel free to reach out with any follow-up questions.