Serving America

A National Service Agenda for the Next Decade

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Introduction and Summary

There is strong evidence over the past eight decades that national service plays an effective role in solving specific problems in every sector of our society. In the 1930s, the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps started by President Franklin Roosevelt engaged 3 million unemployed young men to fight soil erosion by planting trees, building structures in national parks, and otherwise protecting America’s natural resources. VISTA volunteers working to alleviate poverty in the 1960s paved the way for national service programs dedicated to helping our senior citizens in the 1970s. Youth service in the 1980s led to the creation and a full range of national service programs that engaged American youth and adults, including the Points of Light Foundation, in the early 1990s.

Then, in 1993, President Clinton proposed the AmeriCorps program, building on the national service demonstration program enacted by Congress three years earlier, and extending and expanding other service programs already in operation. Unfortunately, America’s progressive experiment with national service legislation ran into concerted conservative opposition. Some conservatives derided these programs, arguing that they simply paid people to volunteer. Authorizing legislation enacted in 1993 expired in 1997, the victim of calculated neglect by the Congressional opponents.

And yet individual members of Congress, recognizing the important role of national service in our public life, came together in an informal bipartisan coalition to continue funding these programs, enabling millions of Americans—including half a million AmeriCorps members—to demonstrate the effectiveness of national service. AmeriCorps members served their communities through programs supported in whole or in part by this legislation, with additional funding from private funders, as well as state and local governments.

The flexible and community-driven nature of these service programs resulted in a diversity of innovative initiatives, continuing this great experiment in national service despite the absence of authorizing legislation from Congress. Organizations ranging from local schools and afterschool programs to large national youth corps and brand-name nonprofits took part. Social entrepreneurs, in particular, looked to national service to provide the human and financial resources they needed to grow their new and creative social service organizations.
In some cases, the availability of federal funds inspired issue-focused organizations to incorporate service into their delivery mechanisms. In other cases, funded nonprofit organizations considered national service as their primary mission. In still other cases, organizations looked to AmeriCorps members to create an infrastructure for engaging volunteers.

While not every program met its objectives, many did. Numerous evaluations and studies have documented the results of service programs, and experience has provided insights into what works for different situations. Today, national service programs that tackle a range of pressing issues—from global warming and economic self-sufficiency to community health and quality education—provide a unique support system for communities and have a proven track record of improving society as a whole.

This paper presents a range of examples of programs that work, among them:

- AmeriCorps members have dramatically expanded the capacity of Habitat for Humanity to increase its output of volunteer-built homes.

- EducationWorks AmeriCorps members provide clubs, summer camps, and youth leadership programs through urban schools, increasing school attendance by an average of 20 days and improving students’ academic achievement and behavior.

- Eighty-five percent of Community Health Corps members opt to enter the health care field after their term of service, which they spend enrolling patients into free or low-cost health insurance plans, learning to manage chronic conditions, and helping them navigate through the health care system.

The success of these and other national service programs is precisely why congressional reauthorization of these programs is long overdue.

Partisan and ideological conflict over the past decade has prevented a constructive reexamination of national service’s even greater economic and societal potential. Cases in point:

- Expanded national service programs dedicated to providing educational help to our youth and to adults seeking new educational or employment opportunities would boost our national economic competitiveness and enhance social mobility.

- Growth of national service programs in the health care arena could help provide greater economic security to the millions of Americans unable to access decent health insurance.

- New national service programs designed to lead our nation toward a low-carbon economy in communities across the country would help our nation confront the threat of global warming.

- New and existing national service programs can increase upward social mobility by connecting disadvantaged and disconnected youth with school and work through programs that combine opportunities to participate in service with training in fields that are in high demand.

- National service programs can accelerate innovation in the social services sector by providing human resources to social entrepreneurs.

It is time to make use of the experience gained over the past decades to sharpen the role of national service and transform these programs into large-scale efforts to solve some of America’s most pressing problems. Today we as a nation are unable to realize the full potential of national service programs. We need to maximize the impact of national service through strategic investments in existing non-profit organizations and by funding social entrepreneurs. Specifically, to give national service the attention it so clearly deserves, the Center for American Progress offers a comprehensive set of recommendations, among them:
Create **growth funds** to expand highly effective national service programs meeting specific priority needs, including youth and adult education, community health, alternative energy opportunities, and economic and social mobility.

Substantially increase the funds available for planning grants and innovative new programs by creating a national service **Innovation Fund** to test other ways that national service can address priority issues, such as teaching immigrants English, closing the digital divide, and ending rural poverty.

**Expand specific national service opportunities for Americans during key life transitions, including:**

- A **Summer of Service** for middle schoolers in transition to high school;
- **Youth Corps** to engage disconnected youth in service while they work on their GEDs and learn job skills;
- Opportunities to attract **recent college graduates** into social services fields through full-time AmeriCorps service;
- Engaging **retiring adults** and adults in career transitions in teaching, mentoring and learning opportunities through national service.

**Amplify the long-term impact of national service by:**

- Investing in **social entrepreneurship** by helping AmeriCorps alumni create new social service programs.
- Mobilizing **AmeriCorps alumni as a “ready reserve”** to provide skills useful in times of crisis and as a resource to address ongoing challenges faced by communities everywhere.
- Investing in **nonprofit capacity building** by continuing to allow AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps*VISTA members to make nonprofit capacity-building their primary activity.
- **Expanding private sector investment in national service** by increasing the availability of and ease of applying for cost-sharing and education-award-only programs.

In these many ways, national service can be used as an innovative platform for change, improving quality of life for all citizens. As this paper will demonstrate, the Center’s policy proposals for national service would dovetail effectively and efficiently with the experience of national service gained over the past 80 years.
Serving America

Brief Background on National Service

Today’s national service programs are authorized under two congressional statutes. The first is the Domestic Volunteer Service Act, which includes both the Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA, anti-poverty program originally conceived by President Kennedy to be a “domestic Peace Corps,” and a set of three senior service programs: Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, all of which were enacted in the 1970s. The second is the National and Community Service Act of 1990, amended in 1993 with legislation proposed by President Clinton.

This last act authorizes three major programs. AmeriCorps, the largest initiative, funds full- and part-time national service programs. AmeriCorps members may receive modest living allowances as well as education awards of up to $4,725 per year that can be used to pay for higher education or to pay back student loans. The second program, Learn and Serve America, funds school-, community-, and higher education-based service-learning programs that engage students in service projects to enhance academic and other learning. And the third program, The National Civilian Community Corps, is a federally run full-time residential corps program for young adults. Like VISTA, which provides a poverty-level stipend to its volunteers who serve full-time for a year or more in low-income communities, the National Civilian Community Corps, or NCCC, is part of AmeriCorps and its members receive AmeriCorps education awards.

The results flowing out of these programs are impressive. Today volunteering is at a 30-year peak, in large part because national service members are more readily available to help coordinate this rising tide of volunteers.¹ The volunteer rate among Baby Boomers is the highest it has been in a generation. Older teens volunteer twice as much as they did in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, and volunteering among college students is up 20 percent.² This steady rise in volunteering is the result of a variety of factors, but the important role played by national service members and the value they add to society is now well understood.

Over the last decade, the Corporation for National and Community Service, as well as private sector funders, have supported evaluations and research that documents who serves, what they do, and what impact it has. We now know that:
Approximately 38 percent of middle and high school students serve through their schools, and when these programs are of sufficient quality, students benefit in a range of ways, including becoming more motivated to achieve, more civically aware, and less likely to engage in risk behaviors.³

Most nonprofit organizations depend on volunteers but have limited capacity to engage them. AmeriCorps members play an effective role not only recruiting and managing an average of 18 volunteers per member, but also expanding the overall capacity of nonprofits by reducing operating costs, improving quality of services, and raising awareness of the organization within the community itself.⁴

AmeriCorps members, a diverse group that includes youthful high school dropouts and graduates, college students and recent graduates, and adults of all education levels, including those with professional degrees, typically go on to further public service, with 72 percent continuing to volunteer after their service and 9 out of 10 going on to public service jobs.⁵

Baby Boomers volunteer today at higher rates than past generations did at the same age.⁶ Volunteering has been positively linked to physical and mental health, particularly among older adults and nearly one-third of Baby Boomers (25.8 million) volunteer.⁷

National service is helping to solve some of America’s most pressing domestic problems. In 2006, service participants supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service programs contributed 216 million hours of service to meet the nation’s educational, environmental, and human service needs.

This last point is most telling. Consider that the Corporation for National and Community Service enabled 436,000 children from disadvantaged circumstances to serve their communities through service-learning programs and provided independent living services to more than 108,000 frail or elderly clients. And in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina, AmeriCorps and NCCC members assisted nearly 3 million people, trained and supervised 85,000 volunteers, refurbished 6,500 homes, and served 1.3 million meals.⁸

On challenges ranging from quality preschool to affordable housing, national service is having a substantial positive impact. What’s more, a decade of experience provides useful guidance about how to maximize a public investment in national and community service. There is strong evidence that national service participants are playing uniquely effective roles in solving specific problems.

These programs could be scaled or replicated to have an even larger impact. In addition, service experiences can have a significant effect on those who serve, particularly during key transitions in their lives, helping those helping others and those being helped. And national service plays an important role in strengthening communities and the nonprofit sector—a role that could be amplified through strategic investments. The agenda below suggests ways in which the national service laws could be amended to increase all three of these effects.

### An Agenda for National Service

National service still suffers from outdated images of do-gooders doing rote jobs that require little skill or supervision. As a result, it has been subject to conservative charges that national service amounts to “paying volunteers.” At the same time, public problem solvers have largely ignored national service as a strategy for addressing important economic and societal issues in favor of more traditional approaches.
In reality, though, over the past decade, entrepreneurial organizations doing vital work in communities have found ways to use AmeriCorps members and other national service participants to deliver important services that would not otherwise be provided. National service may offer:

- Skills that are otherwise unsupported by the market, such as legal help for people affected by disasters or assistance to prepare low-income students to apply to college;

- Knowledge of local culture or community credibility that enable service participants to be effective community educators and leaders;

- Mobilization of large numbers of volunteers to help with labor-intensive tasks such as one-on-one help with reading or environmental clean ups;

- The ability to attract qualified individuals to hard-to-fill positions, such as rural health care workers or inner city teachers;

- The spirit of altruism, which helps ensure that services such as mentoring are perceived in the best possible light by recipients.

Because they attract a different demographic, national and community service participants may provide higher value than those who would otherwise be available to fill low-wage positions. After-school programs, for example, struggle to attract an educated workforce for part-time low-wage positions, yet AmeriCorps members with college educations and retired older adults readily serve in youth programs, serving as role models for youth. In other cases, volunteers support the work of paid staff, enabling the professionals to focus on tasks that make use of their higher skill levels.

Unfortunately, even the most successful national service programs operate on a small scale relative to the scope of the challenges they seek to address. One problem has been funding. With a tight federal budget in recent years, even the best service programs have faced a squeeze. Funding increases would make room for the most effective programs to grow. In addition, as the national service laws are reauthorized, Congress should consider creating growth funds to expand highly effective national service programs that meet specific priority needs.

Four specific fields where national service has a strong record—education, community health, environmental conservation and alternative energy opportunities, and economic and social mobility—are described below. In each of these areas, a targeted investment would allow organizations sponsoring successful initiatives to
expand or support replication of their efforts. In concert, taking these steps would help transform our economy and our society through better education, clean energy and economic opportunity and innovation.

**Education**

National service programs currently fill serious voids in our public education system by recruiting outstanding college graduates into the education field, providing one-on-one attention to struggling students, organizing service-learning opportunities, and improving the learning climate of schools. National service members engaged in this kind of work include:

- **Teach for America** teachers, a group of diverse, outstanding college graduates who make two-year commitments to teach in low-income urban and rural communities. In 2007, Teach for America attracted more than 18,000 applicants, including more than 8 percent of the graduating classes of Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, Spelman, and Yale. An independent study found that students of Teach for America teachers make 10 percent more progress per year in math than similar students in classrooms with certified and veteran teachers.

- **AmeriCorps members serving with Admission Possible** who help youth from low-income households prepare for college and find the financial resources they need to continue their education. By focusing its efforts on standardized test preparation and college guidance, Admission Possible helped students raise their ACT scores by an average of 16 percent. The first class to complete the Admission Possible program in 2005 experienced a 100 percent acceptance rate to four-year colleges, and 91 percent of students in the program enrolled in college that same year. Additionally, 61 percent of students were awarded competitive scholarships. Admission Possible now serves nearly 1,000 students every year.

- The diverse **EducationWorks** AmeriCorps members who provide clubs, summer camps, and youth leadership programs through urban schools. Students served by EducationWorks improve attendance by an average of 20 days, and teachers report that 90 percent of students improve academically and more than 80 percent of students improved classroom behavior.

- **Citizen Schools** teaching fellows, many of whom are AmeriCorps members, who staff after-school programs that expose disadvantaged middle schoolers to career options through “apprenticeships” led by business and community leaders. The students build solar cars, litigate mock trials, publish children’s books, manage stock portfolios, launch websites, and gain the self-confidence that comes from saying, “I did that.” As a result, the middle school students outperform their peers on school-related indicators, including attendance, on-time promotion, reduction in disciplinary incidents, grades in English and math, and standardized test scores in English, and are more likely to enroll in top-tier, college-track high schools.

- Older adults serving with **Experience Corps** who spend up to 15 hours per week serving as tutors and mentors to children in urban schools and after-school programs. Ninety percent of principals with Experience Corps teams in their schools report significant improvement in academic performance and readiness to learn.

- Caring, civic-minded college students and older adults serving with **Jumpstart** who provide intensive one-on-one attention to preschool children in Head Start and other early learning programs. As a result, Jumpstart children, on average, improve their skills
by 26 percent, significantly greater than a comparison group.

- **Peace Games** AmeriCorps members, who build the capacity of schools and communities to implement peace and justice education programs and empower students to create their own safe classrooms and communities. External evaluation found a 60 percent decrease in disruptive incidents at Peace Games schools and a 36 percent decrease in physical aggression.

In addition to the important human capital that AmeriCorps members and volunteers provide to schools, they offer another unique benefit—helping to create a positive school climate. In many cases, they are role models. They are young people who have gone to college and who can relate to the students in ways that traditional school personnel do not. They can offer one-on-one help to struggling students, making it easier for the teacher to keep the class on track. And as an extra pair of hands supporting educators, they make it possible for experiential learning to occur in environments with limited resources. By concentrating a national service investment on low-performing schools, we can help to turn around more schools more quickly.

**Health and Wellness**

National Service participants and volunteers improve the standard of living for Americans by helping low-income families access quality health care, promoting healthy behaviors, and addressing a range of community health concerns.

- The diverse members of the **Community Health Corps** are trained to enroll patients into free or low-cost health insurance plans, help them navigate through the health care system, educate them to manage chronic conditions, and link them to other services such as housing and employment. As an added bonus, their experience leads 85 percent of Community Health Corps members to pursue future employment in the health care field.

- **Senior Companions** provide assistance to 56,000 homebound seniors and other frail adults to enable them to maintain independence in their own homes. Nine out of 10 family members, caregivers, and clients report that the service provided helped them to improve their quality of life, helping clients feel less isolated and more independent.

- **City Year** deploys a team of AmeriCorps members to provide all Washington, D.C. public school students with a Centers for Disease Control-approved HIV prevention curriculum. An independent evaluation identified a statistically significant impact on 13 out of 14 desired changes, including identifying risky behaviors, resisting sexual activity and alcohol, and recognizing symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases. City Year points to the “near peer” age approach of having corps members deliver the curriculum as a key to its success.

- **Time Banks** help older adults “age in place” while staying actively involved in their communities. In its simplest form, each person who volunteers an hour through a time bank earns a service credit that they can use for help when they need it. In Severna Park, Md., Partners In Care connects frail elderly and disabled adults with neighbors who volunteer their time providing transportation, home repairs, and other services. In Brooklyn, more than 7,000 seniors over the past two decades have delivered more than 150,000 hours of service through a time banking program created as part of a nonprofit health maintenance organization run by Elderplan. An evaluation of the program found that Elderplan HMO members had a rate of retention five to 11 times higher than the Elderplan membership as a whole. It also found that participation in the program “may provide
a “protective effect” (for both providers and receivers) against decreased health status and increased health service utilization experienced by elderly persons over time.”

- **Penn’s Center for Community Partnerships** engages grade K-16 students with a focus on health, environment, arts, or culture by connecting University of Pennsylvania students and faculty to community-led initiatives. In West Philadelphia, Penn students and Sayre Middle School established a community health promotion and disease prevention program that allowed Sayre students to learn about community health concerns and gain real-world experience by working in a health monitoring clinic. The Sayre Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Program became a federally qualified health center in 2004 and opened a health clinic to serve the community in 2006. Penn faculty and students continue to provide the resources and support needed to operate and expand the program.

These programs and others like them provide the assistance needed to build the health and wellness infrastructure of communities in a manner that is consistent with the culture of the people served. By increasing investment in programs like these, we can improve the health and wellness of communities in a cost-effective and culturally sensitive manner.

**Environmental Conservation and Alternative Energy Opportunities**

Since the days of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s, national and volunteer service has contributed to environmental causes by engaging in wildlife conservation programs, raising environmental awareness, and taking action in communities to fight global warming. More recently, the realization that the United States must transition swiftly to a low-carbon economy has sparked new service programs dedicated to boosting alternative energy solutions around the country.

- **YMCA Earth Service Corps** teaches teenage youth about environmental awareness through community-based service learning projects ranging from school recycling programs to ongoing monitoring of water quality in local river systems. With support from AmeriCorps as well as private sector funders, YMCA Earth Service Corps in its 10-year history has influenced over 200,000 youths who have contributed over 1 million hours in service to the environment.

- **YouthBuild Casa Verde Builders** in Austin, Tex., responds to the growing demand for homes that have less environmental impact and greater affordability. To date they have built over 80 homes for low-income families that have received a 3-5 STAR rating from Austin Energy’s Green Builder program.

- **American Youthworks Environmental Corps** encourages youth aged 17 to 28 to contribute to the preservation and restoration of public parks to ensure biodiversity and endangered species protection. As part of a service-learning initiative, corps members are able to pursue their educational goals and pay off student loans.

- **Heritage High School** in Vancouver, Wash., with support from Learn and Serve America, created a bio-diesel fuel project presented to the Evergreen School Board as an example of reusing waste. Using the school cafeteria’s excess fat and oil, the students hope to produce enough bio-diesel to partner with the Evergreen Transportation Department to fuel some of the district’s buses.

- **Mile High Youth Corps** in the Denver metro area offers year-round community improvement and conservation programs for youth ages 16 to 24, teaching them technical
job skills and helping them achieve their educational goals. Mile High Youth Corps partners with a variety of state and local organizations to plant trees, renovate houses, build trails, and preserve parks. In 2005, corps members contributed over 41,000 hours of service to the metropolitan Denver community.

- **Earth Conservation Corps’s Anacostia RiverKeeper Corps** engages young adults to protect and restore the Anacostia River system. Corps members educate their community on the history of the river as well as challenges to restoration. As advocates for the river, corps members monitor its health, ensure that waterfront development is protective of the river system, and in the 2005-2006 year alone removed more than 85 tons of trash.

- **Michigan Groundwater Stewardship Program** helps local communities reduce the risks of groundwater contamination associated with pesticides and nitrogen fertilizers. In 2005, AmeriCorps members performed more than 20,500 risk assessments to local homeowners and provided groundwater education to more than 24,500 students. As the residential component to a statewide effort to reduce the risk of groundwater contamination, AmeriCorps members play a key role educating the agricultural community on safe ways to dispose of fertilizers and pesticides.

- **EarthTeam** connects San Francisco Bay area students and teachers interested in environmental conservation to resources and community projects ranging from recycling to restoration. Earth Team also sponsors coastal clean-ups, an annual Leadership and Environmental Awareness Forum and an ongoing global warming campaign that encourages schools and students to purchase carbon credits to offset carbon emissions.

These programs help protect our environment and reduce carbon emissions by changing behaviors to conserve energy and reduce pollution, providing human capital for labor-intensive preservation projects, and training future workers in environmentally sustaining techniques. Through a targeted investment, such as a new Clean Energy Corps, we could replicate and expand these efforts for greater impact.

**Community Development and Poverty Reduction**

National service has been a proven community development tool since the creation of VISTA to fight poverty. Today, national and volunteer service programs help low- and middle-income communities expand economic opportunity and provide pathways out of poverty. For example:

- AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers serving with **Rural Action** provide the core person-power for an ambitious community development and environmental restoration effort in the 29 counties of Appalachian Ohio. They lead fellow community members in a broad range of efforts to improve their watershed, build and strengthen local businesses and cultural institutions, diversify agriculture, and engage youth in positive community action. With this essential human resource in place, Rural Action is making a reality of its vision of clean streams, healthy forests, thriving family farms, meaningful jobs, and effective schools.

- **LISC AmeriCorps** places AmeriCorps members in Local Initiative Support Corp. field offices, where they help organizations develop affordable housing, provide homeownership education and counseling, organize neighborhood groups, and recruit volunteers to assist community development corporations. Many of these diverse young adults remain in the community development field—in 2004, one out of four members was offered a job at a placement site.
At Forest Park High School in Woodbridge, Va., students learn about technology, get older computers out of the waste stream, and teach others about technology. Started four years ago, the Learn and Serve program works in partnership with the school’s information technology program to expand its service opportunities for students in computer technology and community service. In the past, Forest Park has donated more than 50 computers to needy families and has sent computers to a project in Haiti for underserved children.

**Equal Justice Works** AmeriCorps members bridge the “justice gap” that denies low-income people access to legal services by recruiting volunteer lawyers at an average of 92 lawyers per member. The organization’s work has been particularly important in areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. Before the hurricane, there were fewer than 20 public interest lawyers in the state of Mississippi. With the support of AmeriCorps, Equal Justice Works added an additional eight. These attorneys and the volunteers they recruited assisted more than 3,000 hurricane survivors, helping them cut through red tape and financial disruptions resulting from the disaster. This work cost the government less than $25 per client.

**National Student Partnerships** engages college students to staff a national network of drop-in resource centers and to work one-on-one with low-income individuals helping them find the jobs, housing, legal aid, and health care they need. Since its founding, NSP has graduated over 3,000 students who have helped more than 17,000 low-income families.

**Habitat for Humanity** engages AmeriCorps members to serve as construction liaisons, recruit volunteers, and assist Habitat families in developing self-sufficiency skills. In Michigan, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers also assist Habitat for Humanity by serving as fundraisers, forming collaborations throughout the community to eliminate substandard housing, and developing a “ReStore,” a retail store that sells donated household and building supplies. Americorps members in Michigan revitalized the organization, where many Habitat affiliates had been unable to increase their production beyond one house per year. Since 2000, Michigan Habitat chapters, with the help of Americorps, have built 500 homes, generated over 28,000 volunteers, and provided the state with a property tax base of over $350,000.

These programs enable low-income communities to deploy human capital on a larger scale than would otherwise be available. They attract skilled volunteers to areas that lack professional assistance, engage large numbers of volunteers to assist with labor-intensive projects such as home renovations, and connect young professionals to careers in community development. By dedicating funding specifically to these purposes, hundreds of communities that could benefit from these strategies can use national and community service to rebuild and restore their economic health.

**National Service Investment Fund Design**

To ensure that these types of successful national service programs can be expanded and operate as effectively as possible, Congress needs to examine how these funds could be invested under a more comprehensive national ambit. Separately appropriated national service funds focused on these national challenges—education, community health, environment, and community development—should be designed with the following criteria:

**Support all “streams of service.”** Although AmeriCorps is better known than other national service programs, each of these national efforts could benefit best from a multi-faceted approach,
including student service-learning programs and those involving older adults.

**Give priority to organizations that operate programs with proven effectiveness.** These national challenges are proposed here because of the track records of specific organizations working to address them. These programs should be able to go to scale in their own communities or spread to additional sites.

**Allow multi-site proposals.** The “national direct” option for AmeriCorps as well as Learn and Serve America allow for multi-site program proposals, including those that would operate in more than one state, thereby making it easier for strong organizations to grow to reach new communities.

**Provide multi-year support.** The provision of multi-year support makes it dramatically easier for organizations to deliver high-quality programs, raise nonfederal matching funds, and expand their capacity.

These four critical components of an expanded national service strategy would ensure that already effective programs across the country are better coordinated and more efficiently implemented. In addition, focusing directly on these national challenges would help ensure that new national service programs get off the ground with the same energy and drive evident in current programs.

**National Service Innovation Fund**

To ensure that national service programs continue to innovate, the congressional reauthorization and appropriations process should substantially increase the funds available for planning grants and innovative new programs to test other ways that service can be a strategy to address priority issues. Such issues should include these national challenges:

- **Teaching immigrants English.** Today, more than 20 million adults living in America have low English proficiency, a number that has doubled since 1980. Limited English proficiency contributes to low socioeconomic status and the related problems of lack of access to health care, adequate housing, and quality education. Today, children of immigrants are one in four low-income children, and almost one in four children under age six. Almost half of immigrant children under six live in households where no adult speaks English very well. These children are particularly vulnerable to educational failure and other risks. Volunteers have traditionally played a significant role in teaching English to new immigrants, from the Settlement House days to today’s volunteer-run English as a Second Language programs. National service can be used as a tool to address the challenge of teaching English as a second language on a large scale, particularly if guided by professional teachers and high-quality technology.

- **Science and technology.** In a society where technology and innovation determine new employment opportunities, youth should be learning skills that will make them competitive in the future. New technology-learning strategies could help transform education, but most schools have yet to take full advantage of this opportunity. Currently, the federal government spends less than 0.1 percent of its total K-12 expenditures on research and development of new technology for education. National service could bring new resources both to science education and the use of technology to advance learning. In addition, national service programs designed to tap the innovation and ingenuity of AmeriCorps members would facilitate the spread of new technologies, helping to bridge the so-called digital divide in our nation and in turn providing low- and middle-income Americans with the tech tools they need to get ahead in life.
Supporting rural America. Rural communities nationwide lack the access to health care, quality of education, new technology, and employment opportunities available in urban and suburban areas of America. From 1997 to 2003, 1.5 million rural workers lost their jobs as a result of changes in national economy and child poverty is higher in rural areas than in urban. Investment in programs that support continued education, access to technology, and the creation of new community institutions is essential to strengthen economic self-sufficiency and to eliminate rural poverty.

Help More of Us Serve America

In addition to “getting things done” in communities, national service over the last decade has proven an effective way to support the development of those who serve. For example, service-learning, supported by Learn and Serve America, has been shown to increase student motivation and civic awareness and to reduce risk behaviors. At the other end of the age spectrum, volunteering by older adults produces significant health benefits, increasing longevity and functional ability while decreasing depression and heart disease.

To take advantage of the ability of national and volunteer service to improve the development and health of participants, Congress should build on existing programs. Additional investments could expand specific opportunities during key life transitions, when service experiences can have high impacts on life trajectories. Such investments should focus on:

Young adolescents in transition to high school. Imagine if every student spent the summer before high school serving full-time in his or her community. Research shows that service-learning promotes positive youth development like few other programs can, motivating students to achieve and teaching personal, social, and civic responsibility. By making a Summer of Service experience a “rite of passage” for young people in transition to high school, whole communities could be transformed. Unfortunately, research also shows that the young people who need this the most are also the least likely to be engaged. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, disadvantaged teens are far less likely to volunteer than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds, by a 43 percent-to-59 percent margin. Targeting a Summer of Service investment on these youth improve their likelihood of holding more positive civic attitudes, discussing politics, believing that they can make a difference, and planning to go to college at higher rates.

Out of school youth. With one out of three youth dropping out of school, including one out of every two African Americans and Hispanics, second chance strategies are badly needed to reconnect them to educational and career opportunities. Currently, only 200,000 placements in full-time programs are available to serve the 1.7 million 16- to 24-year-olds who are not in school nor employed. Youth corps have proven track records of helping these young people transform their lives by encouraging them to finish school, teaching them important job skills and providing opportunities to give back to their communities through service. Although these programs may cost as much as $20,000 per person, experts suggest that the return on investment for reconnecting a young person through such programs is as high as $500,000 per youth—$1 million if the young person has a criminal record. The Pathways program proposed in the Center for American Progress report “From Poverty to Prosperity” would engage disconnected youth in corps that provide GED and job training through service, building on strong existing programs such as YouthBuild.
- **Recent college graduates.** Programs such as Teach for America have demonstrated that college graduates are hungry to explore pro-social fields, despite the challenges these positions present. Many young college graduates who have joined Teach for America or other AmeriCorps programs have remained in the field, becoming change agents as a result. However, too few pathways are available to channel talented college graduates into productive full-time helping positions. By expanding full-time AmeriCorps programs and creating new professional corps targeting fields experiencing shortages of new entrants, national service can play a valuable role in helping to open the doors of helping careers at a time when young adults are exploring future opportunities.

- **Engagement of retiring adults and adults in career transitions.** Within the next 20 years, 72 million older adults will reach retirement age. Still others will retire early or seek new careers after raising families or reaching financial goals. Many of these individuals may want to pursue “encore careers” that make substantial contributions to causes they care about. Providing a diverse range of opportunities based on field, hours, skill requirements, and length of commitment could extend the productive years of older adults and make good use of the time and talents of adults of all ages willing to make a serious commitment to their communities.
National service has demonstrated its ability to strengthen communities and the nonprofit sector in myriad ways. Many of today’s high growth organizations started by social entrepreneurs received expansion capital through AmeriCorps—including Teach for America, City Year, Citizen Schools, Jumpstart, and Experience Corps. Alumni of AmeriCorps, as well as individuals who got their start through high school and college service programs—have gone on to found new organizations, contributing to a cycle of entrepreneurship.

Policymakers have yet to probe the potential to amplify the impact of national service. To capture and catalyze this added value, policymakers should:

- **Invest in social entrepreneurship.** National service programs make a substantial contribution to social entrepreneurship by supporting innovation and experimentation in solving America’s domestic problems. Tight limits on eligibility and program operations are constant challenges for social entrepreneurs seeking growth capital from other public sources. AmeriCorps and other national service programs should continue to provide human capital to social entrepreneurs, and lessons from this funding relationship should inform future investments. In addition, awards and start-up capital for social entrepreneurs who have participated in national service could create a pipeline of innovators who understand the power of national service as a strategy to solve problems facing their communities.

- **Support AmeriCorps alumni.** The 500,000 alumni of AmeriCorps represent a valuable resource to the nation. Through their service, many have developed important skills, including volunteer recruitment and supervision capabilities, a facility for working with children, or project management. These skills can be useful at times of crisis and as a resource to address ongoing challenges faced by communities everywhere. An alumni “ready reserve” prepared to contribute service as needed could be mobilized during emergencies or by local organizations looking for experienced volunteers. Just think what such a “ready reserve” could have accomplished in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina. Other ways to make use of the growing body of alumni include offering fellowships to channel them into specific careers, providing grants to enable them to start new organizations, and allowing them to receive civil service credit for their AmeriCorps service.
- **Invest in nonprofit capacity building.**
  As noted earlier, national service has helped to build the capacity of the nonprofit sector in a variety of ways, helping to expand the volunteer management infrastructure, breaking down barriers between organizations and enabling them to collaborate, opening the door to nonprofit careers, and assisting with functions such as fundraising and building awareness. Only recently have AmeriCorps members other than AmeriCorps*VISTAs been allowed to make capacity-building their primary activity. Policymakers should enhance national service’s ability to build the nonprofit sector by continuing this option and supporting other capacity-building efforts such as specialized training.

- **Increase the availability of cost-sharing and education-award-only programs.** To expand AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps*VISTA positions at a low cost, the Corporation for National Service makes it possible for organizations to fund the operating costs and living allowances for these members, providing only the education award and, in some cases, a modest grant. This opportunity could be extremely beneficial to nonprofit organizations that could attract a different type of full-time support if a position were a national service slot rather than a low-wage job. The Corporation for National and Community Service should advertise this opportunity widely and make it administratively simple to obtain slots.

National service can help solve specific problems in every sector of society, provided Congress gets behind these programs with new authorizations and larger appropriations. From global warming and economic self-sufficiency to community health and quality education, national service participants provide a unique support system for communities and have a proven track record of improving society as a whole.

Now is the time to maximize the impact of national service and transform these programs into large-scale strategies with renewed support from the government, private sector partners and local community participants. Through strategic investments in existing nonprofit organizations and by funding social entrepreneurs, national service can be used as an innovative platform for change, improving quality of life for all citizens.
Endnotes

2 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
12 Carsey Institute, “Rural America in the 21st Century: Perspectives from the Field” (2007).
17 Center for American Progress, “From Poverty to Prosperity” (2007).
19 Ibid.
About the Authors

Shirley Sagawa is a Visiting Fellow at the Center for American Progress. Sagawa served as a presidential appointee in both the first Bush and Clinton administrations. As Deputy Chief of Staff to First Lady Hillary Clinton, she advised the First Lady on domestic policy and organized three White House Conferences, including the first-ever White House Conference on Philanthropy. As Special Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, Sagawa was instrumental to the drafting and passage of legislation creating the Corporation for National Service. After being confirmed by the Senate as the Corporation’s first managing director, she led the development of new service programs for adults and students, including AmeriCorps. Sagawa was appointed by President George H.W. Bush to the Commission on National and Community Service. She has also served as the founding executive director of the Learning First Alliance, as senior counsel to the National Women’s Law Center, and as the Chief Counsel for Youth Policy for the Senate Labor Committee. Her award-winning book, *Common Interest, Common Good: Creating Value through Business and Social Sector Partnerships* (with co-author Eli Segal, Harvard Business School Press) describes how business and social sector organizations can collaborate for mutual gain. Sagawa is a graduate of Smith College, the London School of Economics, and Harvard Law School.

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