

Service Act Speaks to the Heart of America
By Harris Wofford and John Bridgeland
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At a time when our country faces great challenges, Americans are stepping forward in record numbers to serve. This week the Senate is considering the Serve America Act, legislation that would reauthorize the programs run by the Corporation for National and Community Service and create a new platform for focusing an expansion of service on the critical problems before us.

From education to clean energy, from health to poverty, the legislation creates opportunities for Americans of all backgrounds and all ages to roll up their sleeves and make a measurable difference. We hope that Congressional leaders from both parties will come together to pass this important legislation, authorizing an investment that will leverage the energy and ingenuity of our citizens and engage them in innovative community organizations across the country.

Nonprofit organizations bear a growing burden for providing services to families who have been hit hard by the economic downturn. According to a new report, "The Quiet Crisis," churches are reporting a sharp decrease in philanthropic giving and expect to raise \$3 billion to \$5 billion less than in the last quarter of 2008. The United Way reports a 68 percent increase over the past year in the number of calls for food, shelter, clothing and other basic needs.

National and community service members provide important social services, from helping feed, clothe, house and find health care for those in need, to tutoring and mentoring youth and reducing urban violence. National and community service can play a central role in getting critically needed human capital to the faith- and community-based organizations on the front lines of this economic crisis. We need it today more than ever.

Last year, the 75,000 citizens who served through AmeriCorps recruited, trained and managed 2.2 million community volunteers. The financial investment by the federal government in national service is leveraged many times over — from 2000 to 2006, the nonprofit organizations that run national service programs raised \$2.6 billion in matching funds. Consider also the enormous indirect savings of helping kids graduate from high school and go on to tax-paying employment. A high school graduate generates \$300,000 more in lifetime tax revenue than a young person who does not graduate. National service members also help steer fellow Americans away from paths that lead to costly imprisonment and reliance on social services, and connect the ailing with health services that prevent emergency room visits.

National service has strong bipartisan support. Sens. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Orrin Hatch (R-Utah.) have assembled a bipartisan team of Senators to lead this

effort, including John McCain (R-Ariz.), Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.), Chris Dodd (D-Conn.), Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) and Judd Gregg (R-N.H.).

John F. Kennedy's call to ask what we can do for our country galvanized a generation. Ronald Reagan's call to "restore, in our time, the American spirit of voluntary service, of cooperation, or private and community initiative; a spirit that flows like a deep and mighty river through the history of our nation" resonates today. George H.W. Bush's Points of Light Foundation, Bill Clinton's AmeriCorps and George W. Bush's USA Freedom Corps build on that nonpartisan legacy.

With strong support from President Barack Obama, the Serve America Act will take us forward with new and innovative ways to tap the energy and idealism of citizens across the country. This is a matter that goes beyond party or partisan divisions — it is at the heart of who we are as Americans.

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