

Congress Passes Serve America Act to Encourage and Reward Service

By Joe Sestak

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On March 31, 2009, the House of Representatives passed by a vote of 275 to 149 H.R. 1388, the Serve America Act, formerly known as the Generations Invigorating Volunteerism and Education (GIVE) Act, of which Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) was an original co-sponsor. The Act now awaits President Obama's signature.

The Serve Act will establish funds to expand and recruit volunteers to service programs such as AmeriCorps, SeniorCorps, and Learn and Serve America. The Act also includes the provisions of Congressman Sestak's Silver Scholarship program. This program will provide individuals over the age of 55 who commit to volunteering for 350+ hours per year a \$1,000 education award to be used for continuing education, which is transferrable to a child, foster child, or grandchild to support their college education.

The bill also provides funds to support individuals who require financial assistance for transportation to and from a service project. The Serve Act would increase the number of participants in AmeriCorps from 75,000 to 250,000 and boost education grants for volunteers. It would also create a National Day of Service and Remembrance on September 11 to commemorate the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The Serve America Act builds on the original House bill in a number of areas. For example, the bill augments components of the Silver Scholarships program, which was originally authored by Congressman Sestak. The approved bill makes the scholarships even more accessible by reducing the number of hours required from 500 to 350 and allows recipients of the scholarships to transfer their awards to a child, foster child, or grandchild to help them pay for college.

"This nation is a nation of service, built on the foundation of commitment to the common good and prospering through our dedication to our neighbors, our country, and the world community," said Congressman Sestak. "I am proud to be a co-sponsor of this legislation that will support those who serve and allow everyone to share their abilities, effort, and devotion, while building on the President's call to begin a renewed spirit of national service for this and future generations."

"I am especially proud that my Silver Scholarship program is included in this legislation," said Congressman Sestak. "Today, there are 77 million baby boomers that are better educated, healthier than previous generations, and want and need to keep physically and mentally active in their golden years. The Silver Scholarship

program that I introduced capitalizes on this wealth of human resource by closing the gap between the shortage of mentors-there are only 500,000 in this country-and the millions of children in need of guidance."

In addition to the changes to the Silver Scholars program, the Senate version also adds provisions which:

- * Provide increased funding for programs for youth with disabilities and foster children,
- * Expand the Volunteers for Prosperity program which encourages highly skilled professionals to serve internationally in targeted areas of need such as global health,
- * Focus on leveraging public private partnerships in small communities and rural areas,
- * Fund studying National Civic Health and the role of volunteer managers in encouraging service, and
- * Bars individuals convicted of sex crimes or murder from participating in programs authorized under the bill.

Bill Summary

H.R. 1388 amends the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (NSCA) and the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (DVSA) to revise the programs under such Acts and reauthorize appropriations for such programs.

- * Sets a goal for recruiting 100,000 volunteers by 2012
- * Establishes the Summer of Service program for middle and high school students
- * Establishes a Reserve Corps to encourage service alumni to reengage in service activities
- * Calls to duty our nation's scientists, technicians, engineers, and mathematicians (STEM) to increase the nation's global competitiveness
- * Provides more voluntary opportunities for disadvantaged youth in get involved in national and community service
- * Emphasizes the importance of volunteerism to emergency and disaster preparedness

Provisions of the Silver Scholarship Program * Provides \$1,000 scholarships to anyone 55 years of age or older, who performs 350 hours of volunteer services in a 12 month period.

The Need for Senior Scholars:

* Four out of 10 third graders do not read at a level that is necessary for them to be successful.

* Most estimate the number of mentors in the country at less than 500,000, while there are several million youth who would accept and benefit from adult mentoring.

* Well-run mentoring programs can change youth's life trajectories, reduce drug and alcohol use, and improve academic behaviors.

* A recent analysis of more than two dozen studies concluded that one-on-one tutoring programs that tap community volunteers and college students to help improve children's reading skills can be highly effective.

* The Corporation for National Service funded demonstrations projects which revealed that seniors in retirement will commit to serving ten hours per week if: projects are well-run and getting important things done in communities; if there is a structure through which the individual can participate; if there is some modest incentive to cover out-of-pocket costs and to recognize that the activity has value; and if there is flexibility built into the task so that seniors can participate in a variety of activities and in different amounts and blocks of times. The Silver Scholarship Proposal will build on these experiences and successes.

The Purpose of the Silver Scholarship Program * Mobilizes the time, talent, experience, and resources of people aged 55 and over to tutor and mentor young children and youth in after-school programs for at least 350 hours a year.

Administration of the Program

* The program will be administered by the Corporation for National Service, which will give grants to small and faith-based non-profit organizations that then will award the Scholarships.

* All organizations currently receiving funds under the National and Community Service Act or the Domestic Volunteer Service Act, including under the National Senior Service Corps, will be eligible to compete for these funds

National and community service have long been a central part of American culture, but recently our nation has experienced a surge in volunteerism and civic participation. Nearly 61 million American volunteered in their communities in 2007, giving more than 8 billion hours of service worth more than \$158 billion to

America's communities. Levels of volunteerism are at a modern high with one million more people volunteering in 2007 than in 2002.

In addition to growing numbers of volunteers, programs such as AmeriCorps are achieving beneficial results at relatively low costs. According to Richard Stengel, managing editor for TIME magazine, "75,000 Americans are serving through AmeriCorps this year, and more than 540,000 have served in AmeriCorps programs since 1994. A cost-benefit analysis of AmeriCorps programs has concluded that every \$1 in investment results in \$1.50 to \$3.90 of direct measurable benefits to the community: children tutored, playgrounds built, homeless people fed."

Volunteering is especially important for young people. Research has shown long-term positive impacts associated with service-learning, including increased academic achievement, enhanced school engagement, positive civic attitudes and improved social and personal skills. In fact, James Harris, youth participant in Camp New Look and another witness at our Service Hearing, said that "the most effective way to reach youth is [to]... incorporate the actual importance of serving and ... some actual service into the curriculum."

Service-learning is also a successful strategy for keeping students engaged in school and makes students less likely to dropout. More than just community service, service-learning applies classroom skills by asking students to investigate a challenge in their community, plan solutions, take action through service, and then reflect on the experience and the results. Students who are engaged in this process become more involved in their studies and in their neighborhoods. In describing his service experience, Mr. Harris testified that "to know that I helped reach so many people at one time was an unbelievable feeling. And I also came to realize that no matter how little I thought I had, there was people out there that had much less than me. But I had the power to help them."

Research has shown that service-learners have better school attendance and more acceptable school behaviors than their peers and much of that comes from the empowerment of giving back. Studies have also shown a connection between service-learning and higher grades and test scores.

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.