

Expansion of National Service in the United States

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National service programs in the United States showcase the inspiring spirit of community and civic involvement in our country. They also provide some of the most dramatic examples of the way in which government investment in public well-being can broadly benefit society as a whole, and provide unparalleled opportunities for individuals to grow both as people and as citizens. Conceived as part of economic recovery efforts during the Great Depression, national service programs have been updated and reconfigured several times since. They are currently administered by the Corporation for National & Community Service, and exist largely under the umbrella of AmeriCorps and Senior Corps, both of which have several subsidiary elements geared toward specific purposes. By expanding participation in national service, updating the ways in which participants are compensated, and streamlining the bureaucratic processes through which community organizations are matched with participants, the federal government could provide new professional opportunities for those impacted by the recent recession and help revitalize our society and economy. However, despite the demonstrated impact and potential of national service, the current political culture of austerity and widespread opposition to social spending represent serious obstacle to program growth, and threaten to stifle the opportunities these programs can provide. This outlook comes in spite of the fact that expanded national service programs could act as part of a larger strategy to revitalize underserved communities, increase citizen engagement, and strengthen economic recovery.

This potential is borne out by recent research, which focuses heavily on the remarkable cost-effectiveness of national service programs as a government investment. A paper published last year by the Franklin Project at the Aspen Institute states, for example, that for every dollar invested in AmeriCorps and its subsidiary programs, benefits to the taxpayer total \$2.47 in terms

of improved health, education, infrastructure, and increased tax revenue due to economic improvement in communities served; likewise, a dollar invested in Senior Corps and its various components returns a net benefit of \$1.91 (Belfield, 2013, pp.10-11, 14, 16).

Evidence also strongly suggests that service in AmeriCorps increases participants' sense of civic engagement, particularly with regard to "local civic efficacy and connection to community (Frumkin et al. 2009, pp.13-14, 24)." Given the importance of an informed and engaged citizenry to a functioning democracy, social outcomes such as these make their own persuasive case for an expansion and increased promotion of national service, beyond the already considerable economic benefits.

An expansion of programs like AmeriCorps would additionally serve to mitigate the current dire effects of young-adult unemployment on our nation's economy. In a worst-case estimate from a recent study, the cumulative cost of widespread unemployment among individuals ages 18 through 34 could reach \$25 billion in lost state and federal tax revenue annually, or \$171 per taxpayer per year (O'Sullivan et al. 2014, p.6). By making more AmeriCorps positions available, the federal government could increase access to the living allowances, education benefits, job-training, and networking opportunities that national service provides to participants. In the short term, increasing AmeriCorps participation would improve conditions and increase revenue in affected communities as stated above; in the long term, the more positive economic and social outcomes for program participants would serve to further amplify these effects. Providing young adults with greater opportunities to undertake meaningful work and build professional connections would also be significant in addressing the negative psychological and health effects of long-term unemployment, which have become more prevalent since the recent recession (Chen 2014).

A significant increase in the size of AmeriCorps would cause economies of scale to reduce unit costs for government funding of participants, and increase return on investment and program efficiency (Belfield 2013, pp.20-21). If there were any doubt that such an expansion could be supported by increased recruitment of members, research shows quite the opposite; at last count, AmeriCorps offered 82,500 positions, but received more than half a million applicants (O'Sullivan et al. 2014, p.11).

AmeriCorps' effectiveness as a tool of economic recovery could also be enhanced by alterations to the program, such as modifying participant compensation and simplifying grant and reporting processes for agencies where they serve. For instance, despite the fact that AmeriCorps members are not considered full federal employees, and that they are not eligible for any unemployment benefits as a result of their service, members are still subject to federal taxes at normal rates (VISTA Member Handbook 2013, ch.5, 14). Additionally, the health plan offered to AmeriCorps members is not compliant with the individual responsibility requirement of the Affordable Care Act, potentially making them subject to penalties (VISTA Healthcare FAQs 2014, p.2). Introducing a federal income tax break for individuals participating in compensated national service programs and bringing their contracted health plan in-line with the tenets of the ACA would serve to increase members' economic stability, and could mean more money going into local economies in communities where they serve.

Likewise, simplifying the procedures that nonprofit and government agencies must undertake in order to receive AmeriCorps members could expand the impact of the program deeper into communities by providing a wider range of organizations with program and capacity-building support. Currently, the process of applying to receive members and reporting progress on programs is highly-time consuming, and potentially limits grants to organizations that already

have significant capacity or technological resources (AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance 2013 pp.7-8; AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application Instructions 2014, p.4).

Expanding national service programs in the United States will require bold political leadership. Any increase in social spending will be an uphill battle against deeply ingrained political and economic schools of thought that favor policies of austerity. The reorientation of policy toward an integrated approach of investing in our communities and human potential will bring fierce opposition. However, given the great and demonstrable positive impact of these programs on both participants and those served, as well as their high financial return on investment, public support for such an approach and the political will to carry it out could – with effort – be built through intensive messaging and testimony from stakeholders.

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