

We Need National Service. Now.

The formative moment for a new generation.



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There is now a vast army of young people ready and yearning to serve their country. There are college graduates emerging into a workplace that has few jobs for them. There are more high school graduates who suddenly can't afford college. There are college students who don't want to return to a college experience. This is a passionate, idealistic generation that sees the emergency, wants to serve those around them and groans to live up to this moment.

Suddenly there is a wealth of work for them to do: contact tracing, sanitizing public places, bringing food to the hungry, supporting the elderly, taking temperatures at public gathering spots, supporting local government agencies, tutoring elementary school students so they can make up for lost time.

Dr. Tom Frieden, former head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has said we will need as many as 300,000 contact tracers alone.

The obvious imperative right now is to join workers with the work. It's to expand national service programs to meet the urgencies of this moment.

There's a good bill winding its way through the Senate to do precisely that, led by Chris Coons, a Democrat from Delaware. Coons was born to service and came to maturity doing service. His dad grew up in Boston and said that he never really understood the fullness and meaning of America until he commanded troops from all over the country in the Army in the 1950s.

As a young man, Coons launched one of the first AmeriCorps programs, leading 150 members in 15 cities who tutored students in inner-city schools. Later, he created another AmeriCorps program with a local volunteer fire department in Delaware. "It was the most inspiring thing I've ever been a part of," Coons told me.

His bill would double the current number of AmeriCorps volunteers in its first year, from 75,000 to 150,000. Then for years two and three it would double the number again, to 300,000. It would also increase AmeriCorps stipends, which are now as low as \$15,000 a year, so the volunteers can have a living wage.

The Coons bill is an excellent start. But it needs to be bigger and bipartisan. Under AmeriCorps, the federal government provides money for the volunteers, matched by private funding. State commissions supervise most programs, and the volunteers work through nonprofits and local agencies. The downside is that the big, well-established nonprofits have a significant advantage when it comes to receiving AmeriCorps volunteers.

There are a lot of great smaller organizations that just don't have the organizational infrastructure to take part. There are many parts of the country, especially in rural America, where volunteers are relatively thin on the ground. National service has never had confident bipartisan support because Republicans don't have constant contact with volunteers in their own districts.

John Bridgeland, who ran George W. Bush's Domestic Policy Council, and Alan Khazei, who co-founded the nonprofit City Year, suggest that the Coons bill be supplemented with a provision to create 250,000 "service year fellowships."

Young people would get the fellowships directly and could serve in any nonprofit certified by their state commission. The fellows would have much more flexibility to choose local, community and faith-based organizations, without the administrative burden that AmeriCorps entails.

Service year fellowships, which were recently endorsed by a congressionally chartered commission, would give Republicans a piece of the bill to champion, so they're not just signing up for a Clinton initiative. It's the best way to quickly expand the volunteer force so that it's equal to the needs of this moment.

There's no reason this shouldn't happen. Eighty-eight percent of Democrats and 74 percent of Republicans support voluntary national service. According to a Columbia University study, every dollar invested in national service produces about \$4 in benefits. The number of young people who want to take part in national service always vastly exceeds the number of slots.

And as we all know, the benefits of the program accrue not only to those being served but also to those doing the serving. What would it mean to the future social cohesion of this country if a large part of the rising generation had a common experience of shared sacrifice? What would it mean to our future politics if young people from Berkeley spent a year working side by side with young people from Boise, Birmingham and Baton Rouge?

On the other hand, has any nation prospered that did not encourage in each new generation the habits of work, the taste for adventure, a sense of duty and a call to be of use to neighbors and the world?

We Americans suck at regimentation and blindly following orders from the top down. But we're pretty good at local initiative, youthful dynamism and decentralized civic action. We need a Covid response that fits the kind of people we are. National service is an essential piece of that response.

As my mentor William F. Buckley once put it, "Materialistic democracy beckons every man to make himself a king; republican citizenship incites every man to be a knight." We have a generation of knights in waiting.

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