

# **Creating Opportunities for Youth to Serve Means Valuing Our Future**

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“Every day, people serve their neighbors and our nation in many different ways, from helping a child learn and easing the loneliness of those without a family to defending our freedom overseas. It is in this spirit of dedication to others and to our country that I believe service should be broadly and deeply encouraged.”

—Senator John McCain

“Help others and give something back. I guarantee you will discover that while public service improves lives and the world around you, its greatest reward is the enrichment and new meaning it will bring to your own life.”

—Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger

“Service is the rent you pay for room on this Earth.”

—Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm

To meet the needs of others, to strengthen the nation, to develop valuable skills and increase chances for gainful employment, to promote civic engagement, to build community and common purpose, to overcome social divisions, to protect the environment, to find personal meaning—the arguments in favor of youth service are multiple and compelling.

Beyond military service, the most prominent service programs in the United States emerged during periods of heightened national difficulty. One of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s responses to the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) created employment opportunities through public service particularly focused on conservation and natural resource development in state and national parks and forests. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the Peace Corps—

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Minow served as the Dean of Harvard Law School, 2009-2017. She thanks Emily Feldstein for assistance with this testimony.

established in 1961, under the leadership of President John F. Kennedy—marked the beginning of the federal government’s ongoing sponsorship of nonmilitary (in this case, foreign) service. President Johnson expanded upon Kennedy’s idea and launched Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), which supported domestic service as part of his “War on Poverty.” In 1993, encouraged by President Bill Clinton, Congress expanded youth service opportunities with the creation of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and AmeriCorps. In his 2002 State of the Union address following 9/11, President George W. Bush called upon Americans to commit to 2,000 hours of volunteer service in their lifetimes. Despite political divisions over many issues, calls for enlarging opportunities for youth service have long been and remain bipartisan.

Current barriers to youth service include a lack of awareness of existing opportunities but also much deeper problems. Internalized social expectations powerfully shape—and constrain—the choices young people make: for some, those expectations mean staying on the track of education, from high school to college, perhaps even to graduate school; for others, those expectations mean remaining in poor communities with few economic opportunities. Duties to family and pressures to earn a living further restrict the choices available to many young people.

Given these barriers, a voluntary service registration system (with reliable privacy protections), though it could help increase awareness among young people of existing service opportunities, will not be enough. A registration system suggests that the barriers to service center on lack of information, but more significant in combatting such barriers would be genuine steps to create a culture that values service and values young people in such work. That means providing rewards, including educational credits, tuition assistance, and other financial incentives; community honors, from parades to other forms of recognition, would help as well. Involving young people who serve in opportunities to find mentors, to travel, to report on their experiences in media, could help. Creating even brief occasions for young people to discover the intrinsically rewarding work of service would also help.

Creating a culture that celebrates service in this way could begin in elementary education. The vast majority of states, plus the District of Columbia, require some amount of classroom instruction on civics, and a growing number require students to take a citizenship exam in order to graduate from high school. Yet nearly half of states offer no educational credit for service, and only a handful require such work as part of the curriculum. The most effective civics education, as studies show, involves hands-on opportunities to participate and serve. This makes sense pedagogically and

also advances the goals of preparing citizens to be both informed and engaged, and building communities that expect and honor service by themselves and by others.

Youth service programs could powerfully bridge communities that may be separated by geography, background, or socioeconomic status. Combining a youth service program with service opportunities for retired people could help signal the value society places on service and also help build bridges across generations and communities. Today, over 200,000 retirees serve in the Senior Corps annually, providing an example of service-driven members of the community, often with years of experience. Moreover, if combined with the notion of a “gap year” that is increasingly popular for privileged youth en route to college, expanded opportunities for community and national service could better address the disparities in military participation, which disproportionately draws from disadvantaged communities. Just as earlier service initiatives produced enduring development of natural resources and artistic contributions to local communities, strengthened service opportunities across America would build renewed foundations for civic commitment and connections. Doing so will also create concrete benefits for communities through deepening experiences of meaningful contribution for a new generation.

Counterarguments largely target proposals for mandatory service. Even military service in the United States now is voluntary. Linking service opportunities to training, educational benefits, and other rewards enables military recruitment; similar approaches could heighten awareness and participation in voluntary youth service outside military contexts.

Rising numbers of suicides among young people reflect many factors, but one, affecting teens who are well-off as well as teens who are impoverished, is perception that they are not valued. By offering young people a greater stake in their country’s future and greater personal opportunities, youth service opportunities show young people that they are valued. As the future of the nation, youth are most precious; as capable and talented individuals; they have much to contribute. It is time for the nation to make that clear to all.