

Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009

Introduction

National service for all ages is growing in this country, and with this expansion comes new opportunities for intergenerational volunteering. In April 2009, the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act (Serve America Act) authorized the greatest expansion of national service since Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. The Serve America Act not only strengthens existing service programs, it expands opportunities for intergenerational service in America. The legislation is a lasting tribute to its namesake, former Senator Edward M. Kennedy. Senator Kennedy spent his life promoting service and the belief that civic engagement and volunteerism can strengthen community cohesion and help tackle the most pressing issues in this country.

Created in 1993, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) supports America's service and volunteerism programs through grants and the management of three main initiatives: Learn and Serve America, AmeriCorps, and Senior Corps. The Serve America Act reauthorizes and broadens these national service programs. It also adapts these programs to address America's growing service needs, and creates new service opportunities along with enhancing existing programs. The Serve America Act boosts volunteering efforts for all ages by working to provide year-round service learning programs in schools, supporting institutions of higher education that engage students in service learning and by increasing service opportunities for retiring professionals and adults age 55 and older. These programs will be especially vital in the coming years, as the 78 million Baby Boomers in this country reach retirement.¹

Youth Serving Older Adults

The Serve America Act reauthorizes the Learn and Serve America program, which provides new and ongoing opportunities for young people to interact with and serve older Americans. Learn and Serve America provides grants to educational institutions to encourage students and teachers to engage in service-learning projects that enhance students' learning experiences and address community needs.

Learn and Serve America also establishes new Summer of Service and Semester of Service programs for community and school-based service learning. It prioritizes funding for programs



Photo: Shari Augins

that utilize older adult volunteers, thereby ensuring that intergenerational projects are also part of this campaign. Programs may include students interacting with and learning from older adults, or working with them to serve the community. One example is the S.A.G.E. (Senior Adults for Greater Education) program.

S.A.G.E. offers regular and episodic volunteering opportunities for older adults to assist students in academics. The program believes in the mutual intellectual benefit of all parties involved and also offers the chance for younger volunteers to instruct seniors. S.A.G.E. programs have been successful in many communities around the country. One participant, Fred Stewart, reported, "Volunteering with S.A.G.E. is the best part of my week. I really enjoy reading and learning with my class."²

Other service-learning initiatives implemented by the Serve America Act which engage youth serving older adults are "Campuses of Service" and "Youth Engagement Zone" programs. The Serve America Act authorizes the Learn and Serve America program to designate up to 25 institutions as "Campuses of Service." These higher education institutions will be eligible for

funding to further assist students in their pursuits of careers in public service. The new “Youth Engagement Zone” programs, aim to engage a higher percentage of disadvantaged students and out-of-school youth in service learning projects to address challenges within their community. This program runs parallel with other senior service opportunities, so that members of both ages are provided with new opportunities to serve their communities in similar ways. (Section 1203).

Older Adults Serving Youth

Significant amendments to AmeriCorps, the branch of CNCS that supports outcome-oriented full and part-time service positions at nonprofit organizations, greatly enhance its potential to engage people age 55 and older in serving children and youth in need. The new Act requires that ten percent of AmeriCorps positions be targeted to people age 55 and older and/or to multigenerational service opportunities. The total number of positions will expand from 75,000 to 250,000 over five years. Provisions also call for the State Commissions on Service to create and implement plans to maximize the participation of adults 55+. The new law allows members to transfer the education award they receive at the end of service to a child, grandchild or foster child. This additional benefit is expected to be an important incentive for recruiting the expanding number of older adults called for in the Act.

The limitation of two terms of service for AmeriCorps positions, regardless of the number of hours of service (the figure ranges from 300 to 1700 hours annually), has been a barrier to retention of older adults in leadership service positions. The new law will remove that limit. Draft rulemaking as of early 2010 has set a new limit of four terms for members serving part-time, double the previous two-term limit.

New “corps-based” programs will focus on education, health, poverty, energy and veterans. In each of these areas, grantees will have opportunities to draw on the specific interests and career skills of adults of all ages to create new and meaningful intergenerational programs: ones where young and old serve each other and serve together.

CNCS’s Senior Corps program provides service opportunities for adults age 55 and older to engage in activities that benefit community members of all ages. Among the initiatives that Senior Corps oversees are the Foster Grandparent program and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), both of which include innovative changes set forth by the Serve America Act.

Seniors and Youth Engaged in Service (SaYES) is an initiative of Learn and Serve America and Senior Corps. The program connects Senior Corps’ RSVP volunteers in supporting K-12 service activities and service-learning programs. A recent SaYES initiative brought together Baby Boomers and students at the Academy for Academics and Arts in Huntsville, Alabama to restore the school’s greenhouse and make it user friendly for all ages. Older volunteers worked alongside middle school children to clean up the greenhouse and set it up to be a new learning tool for the school’s hands-on education curriculum. The restored greenhouse has also sparked inter-generational connections, as well as shared programming with high school students with special needs.⁴

Foster Grandparent Program

The Foster Grandparent program brings older adults and children together by assigning senior volunteers to be friends and mentors to disadvantaged youth. The Serve America Act expanded Foster Grandparents in order to embrace a larger and more diverse community of volunteers. The minimum age for volunteers was lowered from 60 to 55 years, and the stipend eligibility for Senior Corps programs (including Foster Grandparents) was raised from 125 percent up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. The Serve America Act also sets forth guidelines authorizing providers to determine whether it is in the best interest of a disabled child and foster grandparent to continue their relationship after the child reaches age 21, and requires foster grandparent replacements to be determined through the mutual agreement of all parties providing services to the child. (Section 2144).

Many Foster Grandparent initiatives place older adult volunteers in classrooms, thereby enhancing both the students’ and volunteers’ learning. Olga Valenzuela, a Foster Grandparent volunteer at the Jane A. Hambric School in El Paso, TX, describes the impact Foster Grandparents has had on her life: “I retired in 2003 and thought I was going to stay home and do lots of things around the house,” she says. “I retired in May and was bored by August. So I enrolled in the Foster Grandparent program and started in September of 2003. The kids keep you going. They tell me things

that make me laugh every day.”³ The Serve America Act allows for additional older Americans to benefit from programs like this one.

Retired and Senior Volunteer Program

RSVP helps older volunteers find and engage in community service endeavors, including intergenerational projects such as tutoring children, mentoring youth and teens, and providing counsel to new entrepreneurs. In an effort to increase membership and make RSVP more accessible, the Serve America Act requires CNCS to provide online resources for RSVP programs, including examples of high-performing programs, and corrective actions for under-performing programs. Also, the Serve America Act aims to make all RSVP programs of uniform high quality by introducing new requirements for grant competition. (Section 2143).

Encore Fellowships

The new Serve America Act Encore Fellowship Program establishes one year placements for people age 55 and older in management or leadership positions who work with nonprofits and government in areas of “national need,” such as education, health, energy, the environment and poverty. Under the new law, up to 10 Encore Fellowships are permitted in each state. The fellowship is funded through a public/private partnership with significant matching funds by the host organizations. The intent is to draw more high skilled workers into public sector work, including leadership of organizations serving children and youth.

John Kostibas of Allen, Texas, is an example of a dedicated retiree who completed a fruitful career as an engineer and was eager to pass along his passion to the next generation. Kostibas used his expertise to engage in an encore career as a high school math teacher. Now he is pleased to be able to “...direct more students into engineering and technology careers.”⁵

Silver Scholarships

The Serve America Act authorizes CNCS to award fixed-amount grants to community-based nonprofit entities to carry out a Silver Scholarship Grant Program which provides \$1,000 higher education scholarships to individuals age 55 or older who complete at least 350 hours of service in a year in an area of national need. The grant may be transferred to a child, grandchild or foster child. (Section 1805).

Young & Old Serving Together

The Serve America Act also supports intergenerational service endeavors through programming and grants that encourage youth and seniors to serve together. The Act consolidates the National and Community Service Act (NCSA) and the Domestic Volunteer Service Act (DVSA) programs, giving priority to those programs that combine students, out-of-school youth and older



Photo: Molly Brown

adults as participants who provide community services together. (Section 1821).

Other provisions also support the possibility of intergenerational service. The new transferability of scholarships and awards from adults and grandparents to young people creates the opportunity for intergenerational connections and interest in community service. The National Service Trust and Provision of National Service Educational Awards pay for and direct the distribution of these intergenerational education awards. In addition, the Volunteer Generation Fund established by the Serve America Act provides capacity-building support for nonprofit organizations seeking to build up their volunteer management. This program may help nonprofits to better engage and serve volunteers of all ages.

One intergenerational program created by Serve America Act is the establishment of the National Day of Service and Remembrance, to be observed annually on September 11th. This new initiative began when President Obama introduced the sum-

mer service program, “United We Serve”, a special kick-off event taking place from June 22nd until September 11th, 2009. By calling on “everyone—young and old” to participate, we are turning a memorial day into another opportunity for intergenerational service.⁶

Conclusion

The new Serve America Act comes at a time of rising interest in service by both young and old. The new law signed by President Obama will galvanize fellow citizens to engage in service together and on behalf of one another. Through Learn and Serve America, students are able to participate in service-learning experiences that increase student engagement and civic skills, as well as strengthening communities. Additionally, the expansion of service and volunteerism has enhanced Senior Corps programs to create new opportunities for retiring Baby Boomers to share their skills and experience through service. Moreover, the AmeriCorps program is has become more older-adult friendly and will expand from 75,000 to 250,000 positions over five years. As Baby Boomers near retirement age, now is the time to tap into intergenerational resources in order to strengthen our communities and our country. To quote Marc Freedman, the founder and CEO of Civic Ventures: “Harnessing the skills and good intentions of aging Americans constitutes one of the most compelling opportunities for philanthropy and public policy today. It is the chance to create a society that balances both the responsibilities and the joys of engagement across the generations, and that refuses to squander the most experienced quarter of the population.”⁷

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For more information on Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009

For further information please contact:

Generations United

1331 H Street, NW, Suite 900

Washington, DC 20005

(202)289-3979; fax (202)289-3952; email: gu@gu.org

GU's web site, www.gu.org, contains additional information about intergenerational topics.

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¹ <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/06/12/national/main2917476.shtml>

² <http://www.beasage.org/about.html>

³ <http://www.elpasotexas.gov/commdev/fgp.asp>

⁴ http://www.servicelearning.org/nslc/success_stories/saves_success.php

⁵ <http://www.encore.org/find/5946>

⁶ <http://www.serve.gov/remarks.asp>

⁷ http://www.civicventures.org/publications/articles/take_advantage_of_us.cfm