

POLITICO

There's no stimulus like service

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July 17, 2009 04:39 AM EST

Democrats in Washington say the nation needs more jobs. Republicans say the economic stimulus isn't working fast enough. We have a simple, low-cost, bipartisan solution to both complaints: fully fund the law expanding national and community service.

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act was enacted on April 21 after support in the House and Senate that, come November 2010, may rank among the most bipartisan for any major legislation in this Congress. The act calls for an expansion of national service positions from the current 75,000 to 250,000 to tackle tough problems and establishes a Social Innovation Fund to grow and replicate promising ideas such as improving high school graduation rates, training workers for 21st-century jobs, restoring America's national parks and rivers, and engaging returning veterans in the civic lives of their communities.

President Barack Obama has asked for \$1.15 billion (already a slight reduction from what was authorized, to reflect these tough economic times) to fund the Serve America Act and Social Innovation Fund. That's less than one-fifth of 1 percent of the federal money committed to the stimulus package.

A little more than \$1 billion is still a lot of money, particularly when the economy is stagnant, budgets are in crisis and the deficit is growing. But fully funding the president's budget request for the Serve America Act is high-impact, fast-acting stimulus, and it is a sensible measure that will put tens of thousands of Americans into service, meeting pressing needs that are only growing during these challenging times.

National service programs — like AmeriCorps, Senior Corps and Learn and Serve America — offer citizens meaningful opportunities to serve their country and their communities through programs such as Habitat for Humanity, Teach for America and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. In return, those who serve earn a small living stipend that currently averages \$11,800 and a \$4,725 education award.

Demand for these positions has long outstripped the number available and now is exploding even further in response to the tough job market and the president's repeated calls for Americans to serve. Over the past seven months, AmeriCorps applications have more than tripled, compared with the same period one year ago, which means that at least three applicants are turned down for every applicant AmeriCorps can place in one of its roughly 75,000 positions. Nonprofit service organizations across the country also have seen applications doubling and tripling.

Here's a single snapshot of the national picture, from South Broward, Fla.: Women in Distress, an organization that offers safe shelter and support for victims of domestic violence, is looking to fill 11 AmeriCorps slots for the coming year. After just three weeks of recruiting, it has received 175 applications. Every worthy applicant who is turned away is an American who is ready to help a community cope in hard times but, instead, must turn his or her attention to the shrinking want ads.

Fully funding the Serve America Act will allow for a rapid scaling up of national service

positions, adding an additional 10,000 national service slots in the coming year, with further growth planned in the years that follow. That, in turn, will put Americans who want to serve — and who are having trouble finding more mainstream jobs — to work in our economically hardest-hit communities. This is similar to the strategy that President Franklin D. Roosevelt used with such great success when he created the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression, putting millions of Americans to work preserving our national lands.

Right now, the House of Representatives is considering funding levels for the Serve America Act, and the Senate will soon follow. Congress should revive the spirit of bipartisanship that moved the act to signature in fewer than 100 days, reminding Americans that our leaders are capable of rising to the occasion, putting politics aside and acting quickly when it comes to giving Americans a meaningful and cost-efficient path from the unemployment rolls to jobs that serve their country.

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