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GERGEN/VANOUREK: Public service pays dividends

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Mobilizing our citizenry through national service was a core theme of President Obama's campaign. Yet that clarion call has been drowned out by the wrenching global financial crisis and its attendant recession. Letting this important initiative fall by the wayside would be a mistake because it presents a real opportunity for dramatic and measurable impact.

Consider this: Last year, 75,000 AmeriCorps members worked with 4,600 nonprofits nationally and, in turn, mobilized more than 1.7 million volunteers in places like New Orleans. These AmeriCorps jobs cost less than \$20,000 on average and were so popular that AmeriCorps had to turn down two out of every three applicants.

A bipartisan group led by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, Massachusetts Democrat, and Sen. Orrin Hatch, Utah Republican, is seeking to increase AmeriCorps to 250,000 members. The increase would cost \$5 billion over five years (less than 1 percent of the colossal stimulus bill) and create 8 percent of the total number of new jobs sought by the Obama administration.

These new jobs would help get the underemployed (primarily young people) working in communities badly hit by the recession. They also would help those youths pay for college, the cost of which has been getting increasingly out of reach as tuition increases have surpassed inflation for years.

Importantly, engaging people in service early in their lives pays enormous dividends for their own personal and leadership development and creates a pipeline of agents of social change for decades to come. Take the more than 11,000 alumni of City Year (an AmeriCorps program) who have spent a year in service. Seventy percent of those alumni, called Leaders for Life, still volunteer 10 hours per month and are 65 percent more likely to volunteer than their peers. What's more, 71 percent of them vote, while fewer than half of 18- to 40-year-olds in the United States do. More than 90 percent of City Year alumni reported that their service experience contributed to their ability to solve

problems in their communities.

Another AmeriCorps program, Teach for America (TFA), also bears this out. This past year, there were 37,000 TFA applications for 5,000 spots - at a time when our inner-city classrooms are starved for talented teachers and energetic leaders. Among TFA's 14,000 alumni, more than 66 percent are still actively involved in education despite the fact that just 10 percent reported before entering the program that teaching was one of their top career options.

TFA alumni also represent the next generation of education reformers and social entrepreneurs. This includes the founders of influential school networks such as the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), New Schools for New Orleans, and YES Prep Public Schools (collectively serving many more than 100,000 students). As a recent Brookings Institution report notes, "Many of today's education entrepreneurs entered the field as Teach for America corps members. Most social entrepreneurs agree that without TFA's human capital, today's reform efforts would not have had the staff, expertise and leadership to accomplish what they have."

To give some local context, D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee is a TFA alum ('92), as is Deputy Chancellor Kaya Henderson ('92) and education advisers Jason Kamras ('96, also a National Teacher of the Year) and Abigail Smith ('92). Sekou Biddle ('93) is on the D.C. School Board, and more than 10 percent of the city's public schools are run by TFA alumni.

What's more, we are seeing TFA alums (and alums of City Year and other service program) dive into entrepreneurial endeavors. For example, more than 50 TFA alumni are in the early stages of launching social enterprises (and receiving TFA support along the way). Three have raised more than \$100,000 for their initiatives, and several more are finalists for or have won prestigious social enterprise awards.

Needless to say, there is a multiplier effect here. After experiencing a significant - and sometimes life-changing - service experience, many of these emerging leaders use that inspiration and its accompanying lessons and skill sets to deepen their impact in their communities.

The bottom line is that national service is not only a smart investment in today's communities, but also a wise bet on tomorrow's leaders. It's bet worth taking.

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