

Obama Inks National Service Act

By Carolyn Shanahan | Apr 23, 2009

Flanked by members of Congress, President Obama signed a \$5.7 billion national service bill into law on Tuesday.

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, a collaboration effort of Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), will increase government support for service, allocating \$5.7 billion to service organizations from fiscal year 2010 to fiscal year 2014. It will expand AmeriCorps opportunities from 75,000 to 250,000 slots nationwide and further establish four new service groups: a Clean Energy Service Corps, an Education Corps, a Healthy Futures Corps and a Veteran Service Corps.

Before signing the bill, Obama delivered remarks to an audience that included first lady Michelle Obama, former Secretary of State Colin Powell, former President Bill Clinton, Vice President Joe Biden, former first lady Rosalynn Carter and various congressional representatives. In his address, Obama emphasized the importance of groups like AmeriCorps, a national program that organizes volunteers to support a variety of non-profits working in the areas of health services, park cleanup and the tutoring of underprivileged children, in effecting critical social change.

“Programs like [AmeriCorps] are a force multiplier; they leverage small numbers of members into thousands of volunteers. And we will focus their service into solving today’s most pressing challenges: clean energy, energy efficiency, health care, education, economic opportunity, veterans and military families,” Obama said.

The signing took place at the SEED School of Washington, a public college preparatory school that educates and boards underprivileged youth in the area.

Obama spoke of an unprecedented desire among young people to become actively involved in service and

characterized the bill as a response to the growing spirit of volunteerism across the country.

“I’ve seen a rising generation of young people work and volunteer and turn out in record numbers. They’re a generation that came of age amidst the horrors of 9/11 and Katrina, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an economic crisis without precedent,” he said. “And yet, despite all this — or more likely because of it — they’ve become a generation of activists possessed with that most American of ideas, that people who love their country can change it.”

Obama added that over the last year, the Peace Corps received applications for three times the number of spots it had available, that Teach for America had received nearly 10 times as many applications as they needed and that AmeriCorps applications had increased by 400 percent over the past four months alone.

Obama said that the new service act is intended to harness the potential that lies in this willingness to serve and to consolidate the efforts of different sectors of service in order to address contemporary national challenges.

“All across America, there are ideas that could benefit millions of Americans if only they were given a chance to take root and to grow. ... We’ll invest in ideas that work, leverage private-sector dollars to encourage innovation, expand successful programs to scale and make them work in cities across America.”

As a community rooted in the Jesuit ideal of service, Georgetown will likely take advantage of the Serve America Act. One university organization that will directly feel its impact is Jumpstart, for a program that has given Georgetown students opportunities to work with local preschoolers in preparing them for success in school since the nonprofit organization teamed up with the university during the 2006-2007 school year.

According to Kate Murphy, site manager for Jumpstart Washington at Georgetown University, Jumpstart is funded and supported by AmeriCorps.

“Following the completion of their service term, students

receive a \$1,000 AmeriCorps Education Award. Jumpstart is the largest part-time AmeriCorps program in the country,” she said.

Murphy said that the bill will make it possible for students at Georgetown and other universities to become involved in Jumpstart and other AmeriCorps programs.

“Passage of this act will make a tremendous impact on Jumpstart’s ability to engage many more citizens in service to prepare young children for school success,” Murphy said. “... Corps members could previously only serve two AmeriCorps terms in a lifetime. For example, if a student participates in Jumpstart for two years in college and wanted to pursue Teach for America, they would be ineligible for the AmeriCorps Education Award from Teach for America. The bill will allow them to serve additional terms of service.”

The entire Georgetown community will feel the effects of the new service bill. Georgetown alumnus Lorenzo Francis (COL '08) is currently a volunteer in City Year Washington, D.C., an AmeriCorps member program. City Year engages volunteers from ages 17 to 24 in one-year commitments to community service in the D.C. area. Francis cited his service involvement with Georgetown University Young Scholars and his role as an English major as inspiring him to pursue service tutoring through the City Year program.

“Everyone at City Year is excited,” he said. “We’re expecting growth and, especially because it’s become a national movement, we’re all thrilled just to be a part of it,” Francis said.

Jeff Franco, executive director of City Year Washington, D.C., said that CityYear D.C. currently has 85 Corps members serving about 6,000 students. He stated that he

expects the program to expand to 100 Corps members in the next year.

“We are hopeful that growth will occur on both ends — both in funding and volunteer slots — so that City Year will be even more able to serve the D.C. community,” Franco said.

Franco added that City Year has witnessed a growing enthusiasm for service that parallels the national trend Obama observed.

“We’ve seen a 300 percent rise in applications over the past year. It’s the biggest leap in the ten years since City Year was started. We believe it is in part due to Obama’s nationwide call to service,” Franco said.

The president repeated that call to service at the close of his remarks on Tuesday.

“We need your service right now, at this moment in history. I’m not going to tell you what your role should be; that’s for you to discover. But I’m asking you to stand up and play your part,” Obama said. “And if you do, I promise you your life will be richer, our country will be stronger, and someday, years from now, you may remember it as the moment when your own story and the American story converged, when they came together and we met the challenges of our new century.”