A Call for National Service: The Serve America Act Mobilizes Volunteers to Address National Problems

United States Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT)

A few days after graduation from high school, when most teens are busy enjoying that wonderful celebration of summer fun, Utah teen Robyn Palmer embarked on a journey of her own to volunteer her time and efforts to orphaned and troubled children in need. This volunteer experience had a profound impact on this young Utahn as she so succinctly stated, “The work I performed for children who desperately needed help in so many ways changed my life so significantly I will never be able to ignore the needs of others when I can do something to help.”

Robyn is not alone in her efforts to generously serve others. Utahns volunteer in record numbers. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, between 2005 and 2007, Utah’s 792,000 volunteers dedicated 146.9 million hours of service per year, with an estimated economic contribution of $2.9 billion annually. This makes Utah’s volunteerism rate number one in America – a noteworthy distinction indeed.

It is because of the example of people like Robyn, and all of the wonderful volunteers in Utah and across our nation who contribute so greatly to the success of our communities, states, and country, that I became very interested in looking at what we could do to encourage even more people to volunteer to further address pressing national problems such as poverty, unemployment and high-school drop-out rates.

On March 26, 2009 I was thrilled to witness passage of this legislation by the United States Senate.

Volunteer service is the lifeblood of our republic. It brings out the best in people and strengthens our communities. Throughout history, Americans have stepped forward and volunteered to meet every challenge. Within each of us is a desire to help and serve our neighbors the world over; and yet, the hectic lifestyle we all live often crowds out our natural ability to give service.

In joining me on this effort, Sen. Kennedy stated,

Time and again we’ve learned that large numbers of Americans are ready, willing, able and even eager to be involved in service, and that all we have to do is ask them to do so. The Serve America Act will ask. It will connect every generation through service, and enable them to help tackle a wide range of national challenges, from the dropout crisis that plagues our schools to the lack of health care in our neediest communities to the energy and environmental crisis that threatens our planet. Many Americans are already answering the call to such service, by weatherizing homes, mentoring students, or working to bring clean water and life-saving vaccines to peoples in many lands. This legislation will dramatically expand opportunities for Americans willing to devote a year or more to address such challenges. It will draw on the talents and skills of every age group, such as by expanding opportunities for young people to improve their communities, and enabling retiring ‘baby boomers’ to transition to second careers in public service.

The New York Times recently validated our efforts and stated in an editorial published on January 26, 2009:

Now is the moment for the new President and Congress to harness the sense of idealism and unity evident amid the huge crowds that massed in the nation’s capital by greatly expanding the opportunities for sustained and productive national and community service. A small blueprint for doing exactly that was just introduced in the Senate, by Edward Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat, and Orrin Hatch, Republican of Utah. Building on the ongoing success of AmeriCorps, Bill Clinton’s signature domestic service program, and relying on its administrative framework, their Serve America Act would rapidly expand the number of full-time and part-time national service volunteers.
As the legislation has made its way from the early planning stages, many groups have joined the call to service and our effort in harnessing our nation’s goodness and spirit of service. To date almost 450 national and local service organizations support the Serve America Act including the American Red Cross, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America – just to name a few.

**LANDMARK LEGISLATION**

This legislation is devoted to addressing numerous challenges that impact every street in every neighborhood of America. I would like to discuss the problems it addresses and the plans included for volunteer solutions.

**EDUCATION**

This legislation will help us focus early efforts in our schools all across America, where we can marry learning in classrooms with service in our communities. We have a high school dropout epidemic in America, with almost one-third of all students and nearly 50 percent of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans failing to graduate from high school with their class. This is a million-dollar mistake for them, since they will earn that much less over a lifetime than college graduates, and multi-billion dollar mistake for our country in increased welfare, prison and health care costs and lost revenues from a lack of production among our workers.

Service learning has been shown to keep students engaged in school and to boost student academic achievement, so we will offer competitive grants to local and state partnerships to carry out these efforts in our schools. Colleges and universities can play a critical role in the culture of service, so we will authorize the Corporation for National and Community Service to recognize and provide additional Federal Work Study funds to “Campuses of Service” that do an outstanding job in engaging their students in important community work.

**Volunteer Utilization**

While many charities also believe volunteers are essential to meeting their missions, a smaller percentage of them actually invest in recruiting, training and utilizing volunteers to meet those missions. There are always waiting lists of volunteers who want to use their time and talents, but too often they are turned away or do not come back after a bad experience.

So we will invest in a new Volunteer Generation Fund, matched dollar for dollar by the private sector, to increase the capacity of organizations to use volunteers to meet local needs, including those among the poor and disadvantaged.

**Volunteers for the Future**

America is known for its innovation in business and the power of its markets. We will fuel the spirit of entrepreneurship in America’s nonprofit sector by creating a social innovation fund to foster and support the next generation of great ideas in the social marketplace – such as Teach for America, City Year, Habitat for Humanity and the U.S. Dream Academy – which are some of the many innovative ideas of our day. These programs will leverage federal investments to increase local, business and philanthropic resources to address national and local challenges and to replicate effective initiatives already under way at the state and local level.

The promotion of volunteer service clearly has a transforming effect on the person who serves. I saw how it changed my own life, when I went on a service mission in the Great Lakes States. But service is also about solving problems in our nation and bringing real hope and impact on the ground in our communities. We recognize that national service programs give Americans opportunities to serve for a full year or more to tackle tough problems and they, in turn, can leverage the federal investment in them to mobilize more traditional volunteers to help.

Building on the efforts of previous administrations, this legislation will ramp up efforts to tap the power of our nation’s greatest asset – our people – to take on some big challenges. These challenges include improving student engagement, achievement and graduation in our schools; preserving energy and natural resources; providing more economic opportunity and financial literacy for the disadvantaged so they can find productive work; and improving access to health care for the disadvantaged. And building on the excellent work of the Citizen Corps created by President Bush after 9/11, we will establish a Reserve Corps of former national service participants to respond to disasters of all kinds across America. In all of these efforts, state and local organizations will lead the way.

To ensure that more individuals who want to deliver social services through faith-based and smaller community organizations – organizations that all across America are meeting the needs of the poor, hungry, homeless and needy – we will offer Serve America Fellowships to give them the choice to serve in these places of faith and community that should be welcomed in the public square.

We have two powerful demographics that have emerged in the country. The Millennials and Boomers are no longer just coming, they are here – and we need to tap the talents of both groups. An American Association of Retired People (AARP) report released last September shows that Boomers worry they are leaving the world in worse shape than they inherited it from their parents. As a result, millions of these Americans want to increase their volunteer service.

National service programs and other service efforts are focusing much of the efforts enlisted our young people, which is obviously important. But in addition to this approach, we will provide opportunities for Boomers and older Americans to serve full time, part time or as traditional episodic volunteers. Our bill will also provide a further incentive for these volunteers in the form of education awards they can transfer to children and grandchildren in exchange for their significant service. I can relate, but I have a problem on
HIGHLIGHTS:

- I have six children, 23 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren – that is a lot of education awards to share. The bill also offers new, prestigious Encore Fellowships that will be awarded to Americans 50 and older who can use their lifetime of skills and experience in full-time or part-time service to address critical national needs.

AMERICAN COMPASSION ABROAD

We also want to spread American compassion around the world. There have been good efforts over the last six years and good bills in the Congress to fulfill the promise of President Kennedy’s Peace Corps and expand its numbers. Past administrations have been active in their efforts to grow the Peace Corps. As a complement to this growth the Serve America Act authorizes and funds Volunteers for Prosperity, which this year alone mobilized 43,000 doctors, nurses, engineers and other skilled Americans to meet urgent needs abroad, such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. This cost-effective program puts skilled Americans in the field for flexible-term assignments, often ranging from a few months to more than one year.

SERVICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In all cases, we must promote accountability for results. The nation collects good data about its economy, but it can do a better job in collecting information about our country’s civic health. So we will establish a civic health index, building on the good work of the National Conference on Citizenship and the Corporation for National and Community Service, to collect regular data on volunteering, charitable giving and other indicators of our civic life.

I want to salute today the wonderful volunteers like Robyn Palmer, and so many others, who keep the spirit of service alive for this generation and generations to come. I truly believe the Serve America Act will inspire and provide opportunities for even more like-minded Americans to raise the bar of service and fulfill the destiny of the immortal words of “America the Beautiful,” to “more than self their country love. And mercy more than life!”

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Virtually all of the programs distribute funds through non-profit and community organizations. In each case, faith-based and church-sponsored organizations will be able to compete for federal funds alongside secular non-profits.

- The bill maintains a vital role for state governments. In every one of the bill’s domestic programs, the state governments are heavily involved, either as a direct participant or an administrator.

- The bill provides tax incentives for employers who allow their employees to perform volunteer service while on paid leave. It also harnesses the efforts and input on the private sector in establishing policies and practice surrounding volunteer service.

- Most importantly, the bill promotes personal and community responsibility. The programs in the bill are all designed to foster new forms of service and to leverage increased volunteerism from organizations at the local, state, and national level. It also allows individuals and small non-profits to come up with innovative and creative solutions to addressing national problems, maintaining the role of communities and states as laboratories for invention. Rather than providing direct aid to the economically disadvantaged, the bill will encourage citizens, private organizations, and communities to work together to empower those in need.

COMPONENTS OF THE SERVE AMERICA ACT

ENCOURAGES INCREASED LEVELS OF TRADITIONAL VOLUNTEERING

- Volunteer Generation Fund: Grants will be available to local non-profit and volunteer clearinghouses to increase the number of traditional volunteers who are working to solve local problems. An investment in the Volunteer Generation Fund would increase the ability of volunteers to provide social services through community and faith-based organizations.

- Investments in national and community service efforts will leverage additional traditional volunteers.

EMPOWERING AMERICANS TO RESPOND TO URGENT PROBLEMS

- Service Learning Programs: Mentors, tutors, and teachers can have a significant effect on reducing epidemic high school drop out rates. This bill makes cost-effective investments in such efforts.

- National Service Reserve Corps: Building on the Citizen Corps created after 9/11, the National Service Reserve Corps would be established to prepare and deploy individuals who have served in national service programs to respond quickly to natural disasters and other emergencies, such as Hurricane Katrina.

- Volunteers for Prosperity: Institutionalizing the Volunteers for Prosperity would help non-profits recruit skilled professionals to work abroad to tackle urgent international challenges, including HIV/AIDS and malaria.

SUPPORTING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP BY VETERANS AND OTHER CITIZENS

In recent years, many of the most successful approaches to addressing national challenges have originated not in government, but with individual social entrepreneurs. The act creates pathways for veterans and civilians to establish organizations and implement programs that have the potential to help solve persistent difficulties.
• Social Innovation Funds Pilot Program: Competitive grants will be matched with funds from local, business and philanthropic sources. These local or regional funds will support replication and expansion of proven solutions to specific community problems.

• National Corps: The Act creates four problem-solving corps: the Education Corps, the Clean Energy Service Corps, the Healthy Futures Corps, and the Opportunity Corps. Participants in these programs will work at low cost and no bureaucracy at the local level to address challenges that threaten rural communities, among them low high school graduation rates, inadequate access to health care, and insufficient housing. This program will be the primary vehicle for expanding national service to 250,000 participants every year.

• Serve America and Encore Fellowships: Individual Americans often have their own ideas about the paths they will take as they serve in their communities. These fellowship programs would let citizens of every age group compete for fellowships that provide assistance in their efforts to provide service according to their own individual plans.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS

• The Act creates a Civic Health Index to measure the progress our nation is making across leading indicators of civic life, such as volunteering, joining civic organizations, social and institutional trust and charitable giving. Just like we regularly measure indicators of the health of our economy, the act creates measures to collect data about our nation’s civic health.

REFERENCES

