

National Service
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HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS TO EXTEND NATIONAL SERVICE LEGISLATION
CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

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It's a pleasure and honor to join Senator Barbara Mikulski, Representatives Robert Andrews; Timothy Roemer; Christopher Shays; and Harris Wofford, as we deliver the President's National Service Legislation to Capitol Hill. It's wonderful to stand with such a bipartisan group of Congress people -- and I know it's our shared hope that we can build on this spirit of bipartisanship and pass this critical piece of legislation. I also want to thank Harris Wofford for his lifelong devotion to public service -- as well as his extraordinary leadership of the Corporation for National Service. He's been an inspiration to us all.

We've just heard three powerful stories about what can be accomplished when people -- from all ages and backgrounds -- come together to rebuild their communities, and improve the lives of America's citizens. And thanks to the work of the Corporation for National Service over the past five years -- thousands of citizens with their same spirit of service are transforming lives and communities across the nation.

This week, AmeriCorps members are leading thousands of students who are spending their spring break building homes for low income residents -- in communities from Lynchburg, Virginia to Miami, Florida. This week, in hard hit states like California, young people are working with government agencies and the Red Cross to help families devastated by floods and tornadoes. This week, in communities across the country, Foster Grandparents are working with children with special needs, giving them the skills -- and the attention -- they need to succeed. This week, in inner city neighborhoods around the nation, citizens are tutoring kids, cleaning up streams, helping children get their immunization shots; making neighborhoods safer, and in the process: gaining a new sense of purpose in their lives.

We've put service at the top of the national agenda -- and we want to keep it there. The centerpiece of this Administration's efforts to get things done, bring people together, and help young people go to college -- is the Corporation for National Service, and its three initiatives, AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve America, and the national Senior Service Corps.

Over the past five years, these National Service programs have developed a proven track record of progress and success -- contributing in very real ways to the most important task facing America today; preparing our citizens for the extraordinary challenges of the future. To fulfill that mission, we must help children and families overcome the many barriers facing them today: poverty, illiteracy and poor health; the lure of tobacco, alcohol and drugs; the pressures to acquire skills to compete in the global economy. And as I've traveled around the country, I've seen first hand, how AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve America, and the national Senior Service Corps, are meeting those needs, turning communities around, and reigniting the spirit of service.

In Philadelphia, I visited an AmeriCorps project in the inner city, where twelve young men and women were rehabbing houses, so that neighbors with low incomes could buy them and begin rebuilding their own lives. Last April, I visited Cardozo High School, here in DC., where AmeriCorps members were spreading the spirit of service -- by helping to paint the school. And this past Martin Luther King Birthday -- a day on, not a day off -- I joined AmeriCorps members as we read to young people at the MCI Center.

I've also talked to teachers and community leaders across the country, participating in Learn and Serve America, who are involving students in service activities that complement their classroom studies. In Minnesota, for example, high school students test the water quality of the St. Louis River as part of their chemistry class. And in New York, nursing students help operate a community health center serving low income residents. These efforts are helping students make the very real connection between service -- and stronger, safer, and healthier communities.

Programs promoted by the Corporation for National Service help solve some of the most difficult problems facing cities and or neighborhood. They also help communities build the capacity to help themselves -- by strengthening already existing local organizations, and recruiting and training part time volunteers. And through these initiatives, we are expanding educational opportunities -- not only for AmeriCorps members, who are earning much needed money for college -- and college loans. But for our young people, who are receiving the invaluable benefits of mentoring, tutoring, and literacy programs.

For me, some of the most powerful arguments to extend and strengthen AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve, and Senior Corps are found not only in the stories of how these efforts succeed in transforming communities -- but how they transform the lives of those who have chosen to serve.

Vanesse Backe postponed medical school to join an AmeriCorps project here in Washington. Her experience changed her professional goal: she's now decided to use her medical knowledge to help under served populations.

Joe Whitlow, a Senior volunteer, has for years inspired and entertained 4-year olds attending a Head Start program in Bellevue, Washington.

Marilyn Concepcion, a high school dropout, joined AmeriCorps in Providence, Rhode Island, and tutored elementary school students English. She earned her GED, gained confidence to apply to college, and is now studying to become a pediatrician at Brown University.

Luis Pizarro, a former gang member and drug dealer, turned his life around by serving as an AmeriCorps member in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In the same community where he used to deal drugs, he's now helping at-risk kids build self esteem, and find alternatives to joining gangs.

So many of the problems we are facing today, particularly with our young people, can be traced to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. They feel they don't have a positive way of expressing themselves; or contributing to the world around them. They yearn for a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose. These programs clearly help empower our young people, and enrich their lives in so many different ways. That's why the President and I participated in the Presidents' Summit for America's Future in Philadelphia last April -- and continue to work with America's Promise, General's Powell's follow-up organization.

As a nation, we are standing on the brink of a new century, and a new millennium. This historic moment offers us an extraordinary opportunity to take stock of who we are, who we want to be, and what values we want to carry with us into the 21st Century. The President has invited all Americans to come together -- to "Honor the Past and Imagine the Future." I hope all of you would agree that promoting the spirit of service -- and expanding the number of people engaged in these activities -- is a way to both honor America's best traditions of the past -- and imagine an even better future.

We know that community service is not a new idea. It's always been a hallmark of American citizenship. Alex de Tocqueville 150 years ago was impressed with how Americans didn't wait for government to act to solve a problem. If a school needed to be built, they built it. If a barn burned down, neighbors would pitch in to raise another. Service has always united us throughout our history. We cannot afford to lessen that commitment now.

Today, as we grapple with the challenges of an increasingly diverse -- and at times divided -- nation, there's even greater urgency to expand the opportunities for public service, so that every child, and every citizen, can reach his or her fullest potential. Service is the lifeblood of our democracy, giving those who participate a sense of responsibility for themselves, for their communities, and for our nation. But we can only reach that goal when everyone believes they have a role to play; and everyone has the opportunity to serve.

As Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "make a career of humanity -- and you will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in." This spirit of service -- so eloquently expressed by Dr. King so many years ago -- goes to the heart of our efforts to prepare Americans for the 21st Century.

I urge passage of the Corporation for National Service Legislation, and call on members of Congress to provide the bipartisan support we need to pass this legislation -- which is now so critical to our nation's future. Extending national service into the 21st Century will give millions more Americans the opportunity to strengthen their communities, improve the lives of our children, and expand opportunities for learning. We owe it to our children -- and our children's children -- to give them this gift to the future.

As we've seen here today, and in communities across America, people are overcoming their differences, and working hand in hand to improve the quality of life in our cities and communities. I hope that those of us in Washington can come together as well, in that same spirit of partnership, to build a better America in the 21st Century.