

Introduction

We're at a pivotal time in America. We face crises in nearly every corner. Whole communities that are stuck in poverty, and middle-class families that are slipping downward. Public schools that don't graduate half of the African American and Latino students who come through their doors. A majority of people of all ages who suffer from obesity and related health problems and millions of Americans without a place to go for regular health care. Conflict among different religious, ethnic, and other groups, and many Americans uneasy connecting with people unlike themselves. The largest cohort of older adults in history threatening to overwhelm systems of care and outlive their savings. Climate change threatening to wipe away whole cities around the world and make entire species extinct.

Many people look to government to solve these problems. But none of these can be solved by government alone. In fact, none can be solved without the committed efforts of the American people, taking action on their own or in concert with others.

Service is the American way to change America. Bill Clinton called it that when he proposed AmeriCorps, but service has always been part of America's defining character. From colonial days when neighbors banded together to fight fires or raise barns to the Victory Gardens and civil defense system of World War II to the swarms of volunteers who descended on New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Americans step up. In recent years, in the face of dire challenges, ordinary citizens seem ready to take action. Applications for AmeriCorps, which engages adults in substantial service in exchange for money for college, tripled in 2009, reaching an all-time high since the program was created. Legislation authorizing the largest expansion of national service since the Great Depression was signed in the first hundred days of the Obama Administration with strong bipartisan support. While numbers of volunteers have held steady over the decade, informal volunteering is on the rise, suggesting that

more people would serve if only they were asked.¹ The human capital we need to put to our biggest challenges is poised and ready.

What would they do? Consider the crisis in education. Qualified professionals in the classroom and leading the schools are absolutely critical to children's ability to succeed. But teachers will be quick to tell you that a child who is disruptive can ruin learning time for the whole class. That a student who misses school—due to illness, because of child care responsibilities, or because he doesn't see the point—won't be able to learn. Neither will students in schools where low achievement is the norm, where doing well in class violates unwritten cultural rules. Nor will students who need extra time or extra help that the teacher doesn't have time to give. Government can pay for buildings, books, principals, teachers, and counselors—but something more is needed to solve these complex problems. Volunteers can help by promoting a learning culture, acting as role models, offering one-on-one help, and expanding available services.

Or think about health. The public debate about health care is really about insurance reform—how we make sure that every person has insurance so they can pay for the medical help they need. But health is about a much broader range of things. It's about preventing diseases through good habits such as eating right and exercising and avoiding risky behaviors. About disease prevention and managing chronic conditions, and receiving support when challenges arise, whether they are the loss or illness of a loved one or an addiction you can't beat on your own. About informed parenting so children get off to a healthy start, and enabling older adults to live independently in their own homes as long as possible, connected to social networks. Volunteers can help with all of these things. True, they can't pay for health insurance for the uninsured, but they can let people know about public health insurance programs and help them sign up (in 2009, there were more than six million children who were eligible for health coverage under Medicaid or SCHIP [State Children's Health Insurance Program] but not enrolled). They can't run a hospital, but they can help patients navigate the health care system, translate for people struggling with English, offer a calming presence to children in emergency waiting rooms—or keep people out of the hospital altogether by helping them prevent medical problems.

Unfortunately, service is often left out of the public problem-solving toolbox. We debate teacher salaries or public subsidies



for health insurance and spend billions, even trillions of taxpayer dollars to solve these pieces of the problem while we neglect those aspects of the solution that could be addressed inexpensively by leveraging the human capital of caring communities.

When policymakers think about service it is often for its own sake, or for ideological reasons—to link rights with responsibilities. The problem they are trying to solve is “We need more national service” not “How do we help struggling students succeed?” or “How do we make low-income communities healthier?”

But that need not be the case. It is time to get serious about solving the problems that are holding us back as a nation by making it possible for ordinary citizens to play a part. We now have the know-how and evidence to support large-scale efforts to use service to address our national priorities. This book spells out how. It identifies programs that are working against our biggest challenges, from getting every preschool child ready to learn to reducing our energy consumption as a nation.

It also explains how service supports innovation in the social sector, helping to identify and take to scale new solutions. We need innovation in the social sector just as we need it in business or science. Because of innovation, we don’t buy the same cars we did in the 1960s, or treat cancer the same way. In those worlds of business and science there are systems that finance research and development, test new products and services, and scale those that work.

In the social sector, similar efforts are poorly resourced and disjointed. Nonetheless, people who care about innovation in how we solve public problems can find a ready tool in service. Volunteers often provide the human capital necessary to start an organization, especially when financial backing is hard to come by. For example, in the nation’s earliest days, fire departments and public libraries began with volunteers, at the inspiration of one of America’s first social entrepreneurs, Ben Franklin. Many of the country’s best known nonprofits, from Goodwill to the American Cancer Society, began as volunteer efforts.

Once an innovation is tested and proves successful, society is served by additional investment—both human and financial—to expand the program or organization. Volunteer support often proves critical to this expansion, as it has been for many organizations that make such service central to their delivery systems. AmeriCorps continued this tradition, providing human and financial capital



necessary to take today's startup organizations and proven programs alike to the next level.

We also know that engaging Americans in service will pay added dividends by changing the lives of those who serve. While we address our national priorities through service, we can also use service to help everyday Americans connect with one another and find purpose in their lives. Service is particularly meaningful for individuals undergoing critical life transitions.

For example, early adolescence is a developmentally important period when youths make choices that either propel them forward or put them at significant risk. Service experiences help them see themselves as valued contributors and connect learning to a positive future—another way that service supports school success.

Similarly, service makes a difference for youths who have dropped out of school. By putting these disconnected youths on a pathway to employment and engaged citizenship, service helps them find a road out of poverty—another of America's great challenges.

Young adults graduating from college may not seem like a group worth investing in—they already have the degree they need to achieve the American Dream. But without a clear career direction and access to entry opportunities, these young people may turn away from fields where their talents are most needed. National service has produced leaders for the nonprofit sector, along with frontline troops and mid-level managers. It steers people into health, teaching, youth work, and green jobs—all careers that will give their lives a sense of purpose as they help the nation with its problems.

People facing extreme challenges, such as the loss of a job or the death of a loved one, often find new meaning through service. In this way, service improves the nation's mental health while it brings important new human resources to the community.

Those who are leaving the workforce at the ends of their careers often suffer from health problems resulting from social isolation and lack of purpose. Service can fill that void and actually improve the physical and mental health—and longevity—of older adults. Service ought to be a conscious way we shape the lives of Americans of all backgrounds, from youth through adulthood.

Finally, a thriving democracy demands that citizens become engaged in a variety of ways, from voting and running for office to awareness of issues and participation in community groups. For many supporters, revitalizing our democracy and bridging divides



that undermine civic trust are major reasons for public investment in service, especially when few other tools serve these ends. These outcomes deserve to be pursued with greater intention.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is intended to guide those who will write the next chapter on service—the policymakers, program directors, nonprofit leaders, and, of course, the volunteers themselves.

I began this book intending to tell the story of AmeriCorps and the difference it has made for the people who serve and the people they help. I realized that it is impossible to limit the book in this way, because of the interconnectedness of AmeriCorps national service and other forms of organized service. This book does not attempt to be a comprehensive analysis of every kind of helpful voluntary action or public service. It doesn't tell the story of faith-based volunteering, or everyday acts of kindness, or the responsibilities of family members to one another. It doesn't spell out the vital role that advocacy by volunteer activists has played in changing America for the better. Nor does it discuss the vital contributions of government and nonprofit workers, or those who serve in the military. All of these forms of service are noble and essential, but too vast to cover in this book.

Instead, it focuses on specific ways that organized service can transform America. In this book, *service* refers broadly to both *volunteering* and *national service*.

I define *volunteering* as service by people who help others of their own free will and typically without any remuneration. Sometimes low-income volunteers do receive modest stipends, substantially below market-based wages, to offset the costs of volunteering. Many people would not consider such individuals to be volunteers, and might call them something else. But rather than confusing people with too many terms, I've included modestly stipended volunteers in my definition. I also see little point in distinguishing volunteering from community service. Sometimes community service is what people are sentenced to do after misdemeanors. That's not what I'm writing about, although there is nothing wrong with it. But given the potential for confusion, I've avoided that term.

National service is a related term. National service programs enable people to help others of their own free will but (1) are federally connected; (2) may provide living allowances, educational



or other benefits, and other supports that enable and entice people of all backgrounds to serve; and (3) require substantial ongoing service over a long period, often over a year or more. AmeriCorps is an example of a national service program. It provides its full-time members with a living allowance (usually at the poverty level), health and child care benefits, and, if they complete their term of service, usually a year, an education award, known as the Segal AmeriCorps educational award, worth the same amount as a Pell Grant. Some people are confused about why these benefits are appropriate and ridicule the idea of “paid volunteers.” I’ve tried to avoid referring to AmeriCorps members as volunteers (even though the term has long been used for Peace Corps volunteers who receive living allowances and even for the all-volunteer army who are of course paid salaries and benefits). It may be useful to think about why programs provide these supports. Sometimes benefits are offered as an *incentive* to encourage people to step forward to serve, often at a sacrifice in terms of what they could be making elsewhere. Sometimes the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award services this purpose—70 percent of AmeriCorps members report that the education award was quite or very relevant in motivating them to join.² Other benefits may be *enablers*—supports that make it possible for people who are not financially comfortable to serve. The AmeriCorps living allowance and other benefits play this role for most full-time members, but so do transportation reimbursements paid to traditional volunteers. Finally, still other benefits may be *rewards* that honor the efforts of a committed volunteer; for example, a gift certificate or scholarship often serves this purpose. When one thinks about the various benefits in these ways, they are easier to understand. And as the rest of this book attempts to illustrate, there are situations when full-time service is far more beneficial than occasional volunteering.

Finally, although there are many stereotypes about volunteers—the average volunteer is a middle-aged college-educated woman with kids at home while the average AmeriCorps member is a young woman with some college experience³—there is really no typical volunteer or national service participant. Here are two examples of volunteers.

I met my first Foster Grandparent on the first site visit I took as a young Kennedy staffer. With the newly assigned responsibility of overseeing the ACTION agency—one of the predecessor agencies for the Corporation for National and Community Service—I



joined then-ACTION director Jane Kenny and Massachusetts State Director Mal Coles to see a Foster Grandparent in action.

I held my breath as we entered the intensive care prenatal unit of a Boston hospital. In the late 1980s, “crack babies”—the premature newborns born to drug-addicted mothers—were a serious concern. In the ward were a half dozen such babies. The size of kittens, these babies were wired up in their plastic incubators, with tubes and sensors all over their tiny bodies. They would spend their first months in this hospital, abandoned by their mothers and unfit for adoption. Perhaps they would never leave this ward alive.

No government or charitable funds would pay for doctors or nurses to hold these babies. Public funds would pay for their incubators, exams, and wiring. Public funds would pay for doctors to diagnose and treat their multiple medical problems, and for nurses to monitor them and administer medicines and nutrition. But there was no money for nurses to spend a half day, or even an hour just holding them.

The Foster Grandparent assigned to this ward did hold them. This elderly, low-income African American woman was probably in her late seventies, or even early eighties. She would not be a prime candidate for a regular job, and might well have spent her days watching soap operas instead of trekking to this tragic place. She received \$2.20 an hour for her time, to offset her expenses. My friends from law school would not have dug around the seats of their cars to recover that amount. But she held those babies, for hours at a time, in a rocking chair that seemed oddly out of place in the room of beeping monitors and fluorescent lights.

This elderly woman in no way resembled the marketing executives I met two decades later, as part of a focus group of service leaders for AmeriCorps Alums, the alumni association for the AmeriCorps program. This group was led by volunteers from the Taproot Foundation, a nonprofit that matches pro bono marketing, HR, IT, and strategy management consultants with nonprofit clients. The young marketing professionals Seemin Qadiri and Khalid Smith worked for top firms. Using their professional skills, the volunteers led us through a guided discussion, featuring a detailed PowerPoint presentation aimed at refining the organization’s plans for the next five years. I was impressed by both their sophisticated approach to the challenge and their commitment to the success of this valuable organization.



The frail Foster Grandparent and savvy marketing professionals seemingly have little in common. But they represent the full diversity of volunteers who are available to help solve America's greatest challenges.

This book points to four ways in which service has had an impact, opportunities in which even greater results could be obtained with greater investment of human and financial resources.

First, it looks at how serving changes the lives of those performing the service. It then examines the impact of service on civil society and the way that citizens engage in their communities. Next, it looks at the impact on specific challenges facing the nation and how service can address them—child development, education, health, poverty, aging, energy conservation, environmental protection, and disaster response. It examines the role that service has played in social innovation. Finally, it offers a new blueprint for future action to maximize the potential of service to point the way forward for America.

While service is sometimes justified as an inexpensive way to get things done in an age of limited resources, I am convinced that there are far better reasons to make service a strategy to solve America's problems, big and small. There are challenges government can't meet, help that money can't buy. Service is not nice—it's necessary. Having spent the past two decades helping to build solutions to some of America's biggest problems, I believe that we will not solve them until every agency incorporates service into its toolbox and every American makes service a part of everyday life. Together, we can solve the seemingly intractable problems holding back this country from achieving its full potential. This book offers a rationale and a roadmap to reach that endpoint.