

Los Angeles Times

Obama signs bill expanding national service programs

The measure will more than triple the number of federally sponsored community service volunteers. The president urges Americans to 'help change history's course.'

By Rebecca Cole

Los Angeles Times

April 22, 2009

President Obama on Tuesday signed into law a bill that will more than triple the number of federally sponsored community service volunteers.

The legislation, which had broad bipartisan support, authorizes an expansion of AmeriCorps and other national service programs. It was named for its lead sponsor, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), who attended the signing along with President Clinton, who started AmeriCorps in 1993.

With his signature, Obama called on Americans to "stand up" and take part in community service. "I'm asking you to help change history's course, put your shoulder up against the wheel."

Kennedy called it "a wonderful day for all of our country and all Americans, who will now have a chance and the opportunity to give back to their communities and the nation, the nation that we love so much."

Obama said he wouldn't be where he is today without the service of others: "When I moved to Chicago more than two decades ago to become a community organizer, I wasn't sure what was waiting for me there. But I had always been inspired by the stories of the civil rights movement and President Kennedy's call to service."

Propelled by Sen. Kennedy and Republican Sen. Orrin G. Hatch of Utah, the act will deliver \$1.1 billion to AmeriCorps this year, in addition to \$200 million that the president's economic stimulus act has funneled to the organization.

The funding will allow the organization to expand openings for AmeriCorps volunteers from 75,000 to 250,000 positions over the next nine years and to establish new areas of volunteer corps in healthcare, education, clean energy and conservation.

The legislation ties service to education, increasing the stipend paid to volunteers to \$5,350, the same as that of a Pell Grant. It also creates a \$50-million "social innovation fund" to provide matching grants to nonprofit organizations. And it establishes Sept. 11 as a national day of service.

Alan Solomont, chairman of the agency that oversees AmeriCorps, noted that interest in the program is growing: 17,000 applications were submitted online in March, triple the number recorded in March 2008. "We know that people want to serve, as witnessed by 'the Obama effect' of people answering the president's call to service," Solomont said in a conference call.

Melody Barnes, director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, said the social innovation fund was consistent with Obama's commitment to look outside Washington for programs that have an impact on their communities.

"One of the things we are very focused on here is not just the number of people who participate, the number of hours that are committed, but impact and transformation," Barnes said.

The White House also announced the nomination of Maria Eitel for chief executive of the Corporation for National and Community Service, the agency that operates AmeriCorps. As president and founder of the Nike Foundation, the former Nike vice president for corporate responsibility has worked at increasing opportunities for girls around the world.

Eitel, Obama said, "will bring new, creative thinking to the growth and mission" of the organization.
