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Obama Signs Volunteer Bill With Nod to Kennedy Era

By Peter Baker

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WASHINGTON — President Obama on Tuesday became the latest Democratic president to emulate John F. Kennedy's call for national service as he signed legislation to triple the size of the Americorps program and called on Americans to volunteer time to improve their communities.

Joined by Kennedy's brother and daughter, Mr. Obama took his turn at the Peace Corps legacy by enacting a new law expanding the government's role in promoting and paying for Americans to restore parks, tutor children and help communities struck by natural disasters.

"We need your service right now, at this moment in history," Mr. Obama told an audience at the Seed School of Washington. "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. I'm asking you to help change history's course."

In addition to advancing the Kennedy ideal, the ceremony was an opportunity to bury Democratic rivalries. Mr. Obama was flanked by Senator Edward M. Kennedy and Caroline Kennedy, whose endorsements last year helped him win the Democratic nomination. Also joining them was former President Bill Clinton, who was upset when the two Kennedys did not back Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton's campaign.

Mr. Obama acknowledged Mr. Clinton from the lectern and credited him with starting Americorps in 1993. But the former president did not sit on stage and was not asked to speak. Instead, Mr. Obama hugged and lavished attention on Senator Kennedy, who is fighting brain cancer and seemed physically tentative as he climbed onto the stage with his cane, but was spirited in his own remarks about passing on his brother's torch.

"Today another young president has challenged another generation to give back to this nation," said Mr. Kennedy, for whom the legislation was named.

The new law authorizes the increase of Americorps to 250,000 positions from 75,000 by the year 2017, increases its education subsidies and creates a reserve of Americorps veterans to mobilize in disaster

zones. To begin paying for it, Obama proposed \$1.1 billion for Americorps in his budget plan, a 25 percent increase over last year, but Congress still must vote to pay for the expansion.

After the ceremony, Mr. Obama and Mr. Clinton doffed their coats and ties to travel together to Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens to plant trees in a muddy riverside marsh. The two presidents seemed in good spirits and teased each other about their tree-planting ability.

"I think the president has pretty good shoveling skills," Mr. Obama said after watching Mr. Clinton demonstrate the proper technique.
