

New legislation triples service program

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President Barack Obama signed legislation Tuesday to triple the size of the national service program, calling the expansion a new opportunity to connect “deeds to needs.”

“It is just the beginning of a sustained collaborative and focused effort to involve our greatest resource, our citizens in the work of remaking this nation,” the president said at a signing ceremony.

“I’ve always believed that the answer to our challenges cannot come from government alone,” he said. “We need Americans willing to mentor our eager young children, or care for the sick or ease the strains of deployment on our military families.”

The new Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act is designed to raise the number of AmeriCorps program volunteers from 75,000 to 250,000 by 2017. The program was created by former President Bill Clinton in 1993. And he was on hand, along with Kennedy, as Obama signed the \$5.7 billion legislation at a public Washington boarding school that serves troubled youth.

The bill, passed by Congress last month with bipartisan support, will create four new service corps: a Clean Energy Corps, a Healthy Futures Corps, a Veterans Service Corps and an Education Corps. It will also create a Summer of Service that will allow middle and high school students to earn \$500 education awards.

Calling such programs “force multipliers,” Obama said they will leverage small numbers of people into thousands of volunteers. “We will focus their service towards solving today’s most pressing challenges,” he said.

Community service has been priority for Obama, who often talks about his stint as a community organizer on the South Side of Chicago as a turning point in his life. And Michelle Obama, who founded an AmeriCorps program in Chicago, is focusing on community service as first lady.

“Through service, I found a community that embraced me, citizenship that was meaningful, the direction I had been seeking. I discovered how my own improbable story fit into the larger story of America,” Obama

said. "It's the same spirit I have seen across this country. I have seen a rising generation of young people work and volunteer and turn out in record numbers."

There's clearly a demand for more community service slots, aides said. For instance, in March, AmeriCorps received more than 17,000 online applications, triple the number over March of last year.

Overall, in the last five months, online applications are up 400 percent, compared to the same period a year ago, Obama said.

"This is an important time for nonprofits because of the country's economy. And needs of older Americans and poor Americans and struggling Americans is greater than ever, and the ability of organizations to serve and raise money is very challenging," said Stephen Goldsmith, vice chairman of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which will oversee the service programs.

"The bill allows us to provide important services to strengthen the capacity of non-profits."
