

Exploring the Serve America Act
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Preface

At this historic moment for volunteerism throughout the United States and beyond, it is especially important for leaders of volunteers and volunteer programs to be familiar with the larger context in which their efforts are taking place. So much has been happening recently, with substantial implications for the field of volunteer resources management, that it has been challenging even for those who have been in some way a part of or monitoring the situation to keep up with developments.

Exploring the Serve America Act is intended to provide some helpful information to volunteer resources leaders, so they will have a starting point for their own efforts to study the Serve America Act and its implications for their work. Still, this information will barely scratch the surface of what volunteer resources leaders need to know about the Serve America Act and related developments in the field of volunteerism, as they go about their day to day business and leadership.

Information found in this material should be verified by the reader for accuracy and for new or newly developing information. Official information should be sought directly from the official source for the particular type of information, and expert assistance should be sought for interpretation of the legislation. No advice, guidance, nor technical assistance is intended through the distribution of this material.

Readers are encouraged to go to the links provided throughout the material for more in-depth information.

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Part I

Historic Pre- and Post-Passage Activity: The Stage is Set for the Serve America Era

Historic Passage of the Serve America Act

President Barack Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act (Serve America Act) into law on April 21, 2009. The Act reauthorizes and expands the National and Community Service Act through the year 2014.

Passage of the Serve America Act was not surprising given President Obama's proclaimed service agenda, bipartisan leadership and support for the Act in Congress, as well as the passionate effort and community organizing strategies and tools that were employed to accomplish the task. Organizations such as ServiceNation, America Forward and many others were instrumental in building policy proposals and related activity that helped to create a foundation for the Act.

President Obama's Service Agenda

To see President Obama's current Web page on service go to the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/service/>. The President's proclamation for National Volunteer Week, held April 19 – April 25, 2009, presents another part of the picture regarding the President's priorities for service. Find the proclamation at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Presidential-Proclamation-National-Volunteer-Week/.

Pre-Passage Action in Congress

The fact that members of the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives spent hours deliberating on and celebrating the Serve America Act before its passage speaks volumes. Congressional leaders extolled the virtues of various forms of volunteerism (including what some called traditional volunteering and others called service, service-learning, national service or voluntarism --- with an apparent range of definitions for each term); cited, for example, Alexis de Tocqueville's observations about American habits of association; and actively engaged in the crafting of proposed or actual language for the Act, some of which was at times controversial.

Accolades upon Naming and Passage of the Act

Voices for National Service, a group that "seeks to ensure the growth and development of national service programs and works to educate the American public and our nation's leaders about the power and impact of national service," released a statement on March 31, 2009, that applauds the Serve America Act. To view the statement go to this link: http://voicesforservice.org/Serve_America_Act/VNS_Statement_on_SAA_033109.pdf and to learn more about Voices for National Service visit <http://www.voicesforservice.org/>.

Strategy that is Reminiscent of Other Social Movements, Yet Still Different

All of the activity surrounding the Serve America Act was reminiscent of other major social movements that make up a part of the history of volunteerism in America. Yet, it looked a bit different. Intensive social networking was a hallmark of the organizing strategy. Involvement of celebrities, political leaders, public figures, and corporate and nonprofit leaders --- especially those with a national presence; and, the energy of youth and younger leaders, including students who stood ready to advance a new service movement, helped lead to passage of the Act. Visit the ServiceNation website to see more information about some of the activity at <http://www.bethechangeinc.org/servicenation>.

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Part II

Examples of Serve America Key Player Organizations

Leaders of volunteers will want to be familiar with many key player organizations that were or are likely to be instrumental in advancing the Serve America Act or the type of activities the Serve America Act emphasizes. This is not an inclusive list; rather it may provide the reader with insight into some of the thinking behind the Act. Readers can take a preliminary look at the websites of these organizations before they delve into the Serve America Act in more detail. Then, once the Serve America Act has been studied by readers, a second look at these websites will provide deepened perspective about the content of the Act. Listed organizations may or may not be directly applicable to the reader's organization. For example, Minnesota does not appear to be in the Taproot Foundation's grant area, but a similar concept is found in the Serve America Act.

Find out more about these organizations in relationship to the Serve America Act.

National Organizations:

America Forward website <http://www.americaforward.org>

Campus Compact website <http://www.compact.org>

Civic Ventures website <http://www.civicventures.org/>

Corporation for National and Community Service website:
<http://www.nationalservice.gov>

Hands on Network website <http://www.handsonnetwork.org>

MENTOR website <http://www.mentoring.org>

National Council of Nonprofits <http://www.councilofnonprofits.org/>

National Youth Leadership Council website <http://www.nylc.org> (In Minnesota)

ServiceNation website <http://www.bethechangeinc.org/servicenation>

Taproot Foundation website <http://www.taprootfoundation.org/>

Voices for National Service website <http://www.voicesforservice.org/>

White House Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (No website found at time of publication of this material.)

Youth Service America website <http://www.semesterofservice.org/>

Learn more about these Minnesota organizations in relationship to the Serve America Act.

Minnesota Organizations:

Corporation for National and Community Service – Minnesota Office phone number: 612-334-4083.

Governor's Council on Faith and Community Service Initiatives – Minnesota website

<http://www.state.mn.us/portal/mn/jsp/content.do?programid=536909432&id=-536889964&agency=FCSI>

Hands on Twin Cities website <http://handsontwincities.org>

Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota website <http://mentoringworks.org>

Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration website

<http://mavanetwork.org>

Minnesota Campus Compact website <http://www.mncampuscompact.org/>

Minnesota Council of Nonprofits website <http://www.mncn.org/>

Minnesota Department of Education – Service-Learning website

http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Learning_Support/Counseling_Character_Service_Learning/Service_Learning/index.html

ServeMinnesota website <http://www.serveminnesota.org/index.html>

Social Venture Partners – Minnesota website <http://www.svpmn.org/>

Vital Aging Network website <http://www.vital-aging-network.org/>

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Part III

Some Elements in the Serve America Act of Special Interest to Volunteer Resources Managers

Introduction

The Serve America Act (PL 111-13) is comprehensive and multifaceted. It will expand the number of people engaged in various forms of service. And, a related Call to Service Campaign will inspire many more people to volunteer. Yet, due to finite resources, its reach will be limited in terms of how many people will be directly engaged as volunteers through the Act, in comparison to the overall number of people who volunteer in the United States. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation), in 2007, 60.8 million people volunteered in the United States. For more data about volunteering see *Volunteering in America* at <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/>.

Careful study of the Serve America Act is needed in order to have a full picture, including important details, of what is or is not included in the legislation.

See the link below to the *May 2009 Hot Topic*, on the Energize, Inc. website, entitled *The Role of Volunteer Resources Managers in the Serve America Act: Stay Up-to-Date and Lead*, for additional timely information written about the Serve America Act by the author of this material; to learn how to view a copy of the full Serve America Act; and to read editorial comments about the Serve America Act by Susan J. Ellis, President of Energize, Inc. See this piece at the Energize, Inc. website at <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/2009/09may.html>.

Corporation for National and Community Service Discretion

The Corporation has discretion to make some decisions on how parts of the Serve America Act will be implemented within the parameters of the legislative language. What is decided at the discretion of the Corporation will have a significant impact on what actually transpires during implementation of the Act. The incorporation of standards and best practices of the volunteer resources management field, including from the perspective of a wide range of day-to-day practitioners at the local level, can be a huge contribution to people and communities throughout the nation and even internationally.

At dissemination of this material, the Corporation is seeking input about the Act. Go to

http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/newsroom/statements_detail.asp?tbl_pr_id=1321 to see the announcement seeking participation.

To see a detailed summary of the Act on the Corporation's website go to http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/09_0331_recovery_summary.pdf

State Commissions, Intent to Apply for Various Funds, and National Service Plans

Minnesota's State [Service] Commission is known as ServeMinnesota. Its website is <http://www.serveminnesota.org/index.html>.

State Commissions decide to apply for or elect to participate for some Serve America Act funds in order for those funds to be received by the State.

State Commissions must be consulted before an application by another organization for certain funds. And, when specified, an alternate entity may be able to apply for funds not being sought by a State. For these reasons, it behooves interested parties to check with their State Commission to learn how to determine whether or not the State intends to apply for particular funds that will flow through the Act, and to provide and obtain other necessary information.

State Commissions will prepare a three year State national service plan that is developed through an open, public process and that includes input from a wide range of stakeholders described in the law. An annual update to the State plan is required, according to the Serve America Act. States that apply for funds under Subtitle B or Subtitle C of the Serve America Act will generally be required to prepare a State plan for service by adults age 55 or older.

Membership of State Commissions must now include a representative of the volunteer sector. Judie Russell, Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration founder and board member currently serves on the ServeMinnesota board.

Volunteer Generation Fund

According to the Serve America Act, the Corporation may "make grants to State .Commissions and nonprofit organizations ... to—

- (1) develop and carry out volunteer programs
- (2) make subgrants to support and create new local community-based entities that recruit, manage, or support volunteers...."

For the first item above, it appears that grants would focus on areas consistent with the State's national service plan or Corporation priorities. In regard to the second item above, more information is needed to better understand how this part of the Act will be implemented. One area that remains unclear is whether or not grants will be made only to intermediary-type organizations or also to ongoing direct service volunteer programs. Note the word "or" in regard to the second item above. Both allotments and competitive grants are authorized in this section of the Act. More detail about the Volunteer Generation Fund can be found in the Act.

Service-Learning Programs

The Serve America Act indicates that the Corporation, in consultation with the Secretary of Education, may make allotments to States, territories, and Indian tribes to pay for the federal portion of specified costs pertaining to service-learning.

Certain funds are made available to States on a formula basis with a part of those funds reserved for identified purposes. Other types of funds are awarded through a competitive process.

In Minnesota, service-learning funds for school based formula grants flow through the Minnesota Department of Education. According to the Act, applicants for allotments must include a three year plan for promoting service-learning

Overall allotments for school-based service-learning are slightly reduced in the Serve America Act.

Included in the longer list of possible costs service-learning funds can support are costs of a service-learning coordinator, who may be a national service participant under Subtitle C of the Act or receive an education award under Subtitle D of the Act. Engagement of community-based entities and the formation of partnerships for service-learning are examples of some of the other types of costs that can be a part of service-learning through schools.

One example of an identified area to be included in the application for service-learning funds is the opportunity for students to serve together.

Another program described in the Serve America Act is Innovative and Community-Based Service-Learning Programs and Research.

The Act also allows for annual designation of up to 25 institutions of higher education as Campuses of Service. Higher education institutions are nominated by State Commissions.

Social Innovation Funds

The Serve America Act includes Social Innovation funds that will be granted, on a competitive basis, for five year periods with the possibility of renewal for another five years in amounts ranging from one to 10 million dollars per year. Subgrants in this area are authorized “to replicate or expand proven initiatives, or support new initiatives....,” according to the Act. Detailed information is provided in the Act about the nature of the grants, eligible types of organizations, grant criteria and requirements. Among other things, an emphasis is placed on measurable outcomes and evidence-based decision-making. Civic engagement is listed as one of the focus areas for proposals. A goal is to develop a network of Social Innovation Funds with public and private support.

Nonprofit Capacity Building Program

The Serve America Act includes a Nonprofit Capacity Building Program that will provide grants to nonprofit intermediary organizations. The Act identifies that grants are intended to be used for organizational development in areas such as best practices training, financial planning, writing grants, and compliance with tax laws. No specific mention could be found of organizational development training for volunteer resources management best practices. The organizational development is geared for small to midsize nonprofit organizations experiencing hardship. A goal is to have an intermediary nonprofit for this purpose in each state with a grant of not less than \$200,000, indicates the Act.

Training and Technical Assistance

The Serve America Act addresses training and technical assistance for programs that fall under the national service laws. Among several other listed areas for training and technical assistance identified in the Act, is “training for individuals operating or overseeing national service programs—

...in volunteer recruitment, management, and retention to improve the abilities of such individuals to use participants and other volunteers in an effective manner....”

Serve America Fellowships

A limited number of Serve America Fellowships are authorized in identified areas of national need. Interested persons would apply to a State Commission that has elected to participate, according to specifications.

Small service sponsor organizations described in the Act will register with the State Commission. A list of registered sponsor organizations will be maintained on a public website.

Silver Scholars and Encore Fellowships

Two other programs described in the Serve America Act are Silver Scholars and Encore Fellowships. Silver Scholar funds, in fixed amounts, may be granted to community-based entities for Silver Scholarship grants for people age 55 or older, who complete 350 hours of service in one year according to specifications and then become eligible for a national service education award. Encore Fellowships are for people age 55 or older to address areas of national need through a service project with a goal to later move into to full-time or part-time public service. Applications by interested persons will be submitted to the Corporation according to specifications. A list of eligible organizations for Encore Fellows will be maintained by the Corporation and no more than 10 fellows from each state can be selected, according to the Act. More details about Silver Scholars and Encore Fellowships are found in the Act.

September 11 – National Day of Service and Remembrance

The Corporation may organize activities in observance of the September 11th National Day of Service and Remembrance.

Other Volunteer Resources Management Topics of Importance in the Act

Several additional topics of importance to volunteer resources management are addressed in some way through the legislation. Volunteer resources managers will want to be familiar with legislative language surrounding the following and other topics:

- Provisions for non-displacement of employees and volunteers by national service participants
- Removal of some limitations on terms of service for national service participants
- Allowable education awards for various types/lengths of national service, including eligibility requirements and award amounts under various circumstances
- The need to obtain written permission before transporting children
- Specified criminal history check requirements for people participating in national service programs
- Evaluation requirements with a focus on performance measures, including effective use of participants and cost-effectiveness of programs
- An emphasis on cross-sector partnerships, for example partnerships with nonprofits, community based organizations, State and local units of government, faith-based organizations, and/or businesses, as well as partnerships across various Subtitles of the Serve America Act.

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Part IV

Examples of Studies and Research in the Serve America Act

Among studies and research included in the Serve America Act (PL 111-13) are:

- **A 10-year longitudinal service-learning study** that will identify the degree of improved student academic achievement, student engagement, and graduation rates, as well as engagement “in subsequent national service, volunteering, or other service activities, or pursued careers in public service, in the nonprofit sector or government,” indicates the Act.
- **A Volunteer Management Corps study**, within six months of enactment of the Serve America Act, to learn how to establish and implement this Corps for managers with business and technical skills to address the Nation’s challenges and assist nonprofits and State and local governments to create efficiencies and cost savings and to develop programs, according to the Act. (This appears to refer to a Corps of volunteers who are managers rather than specifically volunteer resources managers.)
- **A feasibility study on the efficiency and effectiveness of criminal history checks.** The Act states that, within six months of enactment of the Act, the Attorney General will provide an interim report to the “appropriate committees of Congress” and within one year of enactment a final report will be submitted by the Attorney General “to the Committee on the Judiciary and the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions of the Senate and to the Committee on the Judiciary and the Committee on Education and Labor of the House of Representatives....” More language pertaining to the content of the study is found within the legislation.
- **A Civic Health Assessment and Volunteering Research and Evaluation** carried out in partnership with the National Conference on Citizenship. The Director of the Bureau of Census and the Commissioner of Labor Statistics can be requested to provide technical advice on the selection of civic health indicators. Civic health indicators and topics that might be addressed in the Civic Health Assessment are listed in the Act. Volunteering research and evaluation will provide baseline research on domestic and international volunteering and other areas, as well as “independent evaluation of the impact of domestic and international volunteering, including assessment of best practices for such volunteering....,” according to the Act.
- **Other studies**, for example a Study of the Involvement of Veterans and a Study to Examine and Increase Service Programs for Displaced Workers in Service Corps and Community Service and to Develop Pilot Program planning.

Part V

Jump on Board!

Jump on Board! Now is the time for individuals and organization leaders to exert their leadership and help shape the future for long-term strength and success of the volunteer community. Volunteer resources managers and leaders of volunteer programs are needed to share with their community, organization and partners-in-change their vast experience, expertise and body of knowledge. To advance the field during the Serve America Era; achieve community results; provide meaningful, mutual experiences; and serve the community together with others, volunteer resources managers must sit as equal partners at the collaborative table of leadership.

About Paula J. Beugen

Paula J. Beugen has been a leader in the field of volunteerism and volunteer resources management for more than three decades. She has a long history of paid and unpaid service to the community in a variety of roles and sectors.

Beugen is an active member of the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA), a former MAVA Board Member, and a former MAVA Public Affairs Chair.

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