

# Serve America. Together.

## Our Vision for the Future

*Serve America Together* is a campaign to make national service part of growing up in America.

For too long, national service has not been an option for most young Americans. The college affordability crisis has left too many students with debt that they're struggling to repay. Millions of young people are out of work, their talents untapped. Communities across the country face significant unmet challenges including education inequity, disaster relief, aging populations, and substance abuse issues. Americans are more profoundly polarized than any moment in recent history. We are beginning to truly confront the systemic racism of our institutions and society. And our country is grappling with public health, economic, social, and educational crises as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Imagine a future in which young people earn college tuition by addressing our communities' greatest challenges — where they are empowered to shape their own destinies and those of their communities, regardless of zip code. Imagine a future in which empathy trumps apathy and participation and problem-solving outmatch indifference. Imagine a shared experience far stronger than anything that may seek to divide us.

This future is entirely achievable if a year of service is part of growing up in America. The White House, Congress, state and local leaders, business, community and philanthropic leaders, and every American should be working to make this future a reality. America has been at crossroads like this before. If we are going to achieve this bold vision, we must be audacious in our call to action and make national service a national priority. National service can transform lives, strengthen communities, and fuel civic renewal. Our country *can* do big things together. And Service Year Alliance is organizing the stakeholders, the strategy, and the movement we need to bring this vision to life.

We believe civilian national service should:

1. Exist at scale, engaging at least one million young Americans in civilian national service annually
2. Address America's unmet needs
3. Bridge divides and fuel civic renewal
4. Be an opportunity for all
5. Build pathways to long-term success for individuals who serve through benefits and connectivity to future education and careers

Our campaign platform is detailed below.

## Campaign Platform

### A. National service should exist at scale.

National service transforms lives, strengthens communities, and fuels civic renewal. It empowers young Americans to take their futures into their own hands and make an impact in their local communities while becoming the active citizens and leaders our nation needs.

At a moment of record high youth unemployment, with unprecedented challenges facing local communities and a generation of young people looking for tangible ways to make a difference, there has never been a more important moment for our country to invest in national service.

In order to make national service part of growing up in America, it must be an opportunity that all young Americans can pursue. *Serve America Together* aims to grow national service from about 75,000 people serving annually today to one million young people serving each year.

While this aim is ambitious, making this opportunity a foundational part of growing up in America means creating a culture of service within our society. Research shows that, if given the opportunity, one in four young people would raise their hands to serve today. It's up to us to meet this demand from our next generation.

*Serve America Together* will fight to expand civilian national service opportunities so that every young American has the opportunity to serve. To reach one million young people serving every year, efforts would include:

- Ensuring Congress fully funds national service
  - Expanding and reauthorizing AmeriCorps, the largest civilian national service program
  - Expanding YouthBuild, a program that targets low-income young people and empowers them to rebuild their communities and their lives
  - Expanding Peace Corps, a program for Americans interested in serving in communities abroad
- Authorizing and implementing 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (21CSC), a private-public partnership that could engage more than 25,000 returning veterans and young Americans each year to strengthen America's infrastructure
- Replicating the FEMA Corps model and encouraging all federal agencies to develop civilian national service opportunities that strategically advance their missions and build their workforce pipeline
- Encouraging the creation of more service years that are funded independently of federal national service funding; primarily through philanthropy and private institutions

- Making national service opportunities easy to identify and choose between using technology

### B. National service should address America's unmet needs.

National service is a critical tool that can be deployed quickly and efficiently to address pressing challenges facing local communities. We've seen national service adapt to meeting local needs after natural disasters and respond to crises like COVID-19.

National service traditionally operates like a network with local authority. National service in Birmingham will look different from service in Butte or Boston, ensuring that local needs are met and communities are thriving. A new system of voluntary universal national service would broaden this approach by supporting the development of state and local plans and expanding the number of communities deeply engaged in expanding opportunities to serve. The success of such an expansion is dependent upon national service being flexible enough to address local problems and the leadership of local communities.

*Serve America Together* will work to ensure that national service can be utilized to address unmet needs across the country by:

- Ensuring national service is embedded in institutional structures and the benefits are felt by people in all local communities. We will do this by:
  - Encouraging interagency collaboration at the federal and state level to use national service to address unmet needs.
  - Ensuring national service builds skills that the nation needs right now
  - Making sure every community has access to and can benefit from national service.
- Engaging a broad-cross section of community stakeholders in the effort, including schools, colleges, employers, nonprofits, public agencies, existing national service programs, and young people in defining needs and building national service into their communities.

### C. National service should bridge divides and fuel civic renewal.

*Serve America Together* aims to redefine what it means to serve your country — encouraging Americans to consider serving through civilian national service, in addition to military and public service.

We believe that military and civilian national service are two sides of the same coin, and that America works best when every individual is invested in a positive vision for our collective future. This campaign aims to bridge our country's divides — political, demographic, economic, social, etc — including the civilian-military divide. We furthermore believe that the

burden of our collective freedom should be carried more broadly by Americans, and that this demands active citizenship built on a responsibility to serve.

Today, 71% of young Americans are ineligible for military service for physical, behavioral, or educational reasons, and 66% of 18-24 year olds are unaware that full-time civilian national service opportunities exist, posing challenges to building the next generation of service-minded Americans. We're turning away young people who have raised their hand and said that they want to serve without providing them with other opportunities for them to do so. Civilian national service is a complementary option that can engage a broader constituency in our national project.

Meanwhile, Republicans and Democrats are more ideologically divided than at any point in the last two decades. Faith in our institutions is at an all-time low. And research has confirmed that three out of four Americans see the country as "greatly divided when it comes to the most important values," leading to gridlock, conflict, and threats to our democracy. While COVID-19 initially led more Americans to feelings of unification, recent data suggests perceptions of unity are much more likely to be positive or neutral at the community level than at the national level.

National service has the power to bring people together across lines of difference. Bonds shared among members of a unit in the American military often transcend background, as do those in a corps serving in schools or public lands. Additionally, national service can create a more engaged and culturally competent generation of leaders who are more empathetic and better understand people who are different than themselves. National service alums are more likely to volunteer in their communities, are more likely to vote, and have the ability to understand and work together with people from different backgrounds.

*Serve America Together* will fight for policies to bring people together and build a stronger and more engaged citizenry, including:

- Investing in opportunities that allow for more Americans to serve whether in military, civilian, or public service
  - Creating a Cabinet-level position that would oversee an interagency White House Council on military, national, and public service
  - Piloting joint recruitment programs for AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, YouthBuild, and each armed services recruiting command
  - Enabling individuals to choose whether and where to serve, including military, public, and civilian service options in their own communities or around the world
- Bridging the military-civilian divide
  - Expanding civilian national service opportunities that ease the transition from active duty to civilian life for military servicemembers
  - Expanding national service programs that engage and support military families
  - Building out training, programs, and experiences that bridge military and civilian service

- Engaging national service alums and veterans from the community, providing them with a platform to share their stories of service
- Establishing and funding a National Service Reserve Corps that brings together civilian service alumni and veterans to respond to disasters and emergencies.
- Creating a shared experience through service to develop a more culturally competent and civically engaged generation of Americans
  - Developing cultural competency training and assessments
  - Creating partnerships to develop minimum standard training on civic engagement
  - Establishing opportunities for shared experiences for service year corps members across programs
- Investing in national service as an experience that prepares young people for a life of active citizenship

#### D. National service should be an opportunity for all.

We need a new social contract in America with the clear commitment that if you invest in your country, your country will invest in you.

We believe that national service is the great equalizer: it can put millions of young people to work and set them on a path to succeed. Whether through civilian, military, or public service, service empowers young Americans to become the leaders our country needs. Yet, for too many Americans, particularly those who find themselves disconnected from a career or education, national service is out of reach.

Additionally, at a time when an entire generation of Americans find their lives disrupted due to the uncertainty created by COVID-19, national service is an opportunity that can put these young people on a path to future education or a career. By expanding opportunities to serve, national service can safely engage these high school and college graduates in meaningful service in their local communities.

This is a pivotal moment for our country — one that requires us to confront inequities that have acted as barriers to success, especially for underrepresented populations. By removing these systemic barriers, national service has the potential to benefit *all* young Americans and transform their lives.

*Serve America Together* will fight to make national service an opportunity for all by supporting policies that include the following:

- Ensuring all national service opportunities are paid
- Increasing the AmeriCorps living allowance and ensuring the living allowance is adjusted in areas with high cost of living

- Making education awards and living allowances tax-free
- Removing existing policy and perceived barriers for underrepresented populations to serve — including, but not limited to, educational attainment, justice-involvement, and disenfranchisement from our nations’ systems
- Creating the conditions that allow for more people of color and tribal communities to serve
- Supporting rural communities’ efforts to create, recruit for, and sustain national service programs
- Ensuring provisions of accommodations to enable people with disabilities to serve
- Expanding wraparound supports, including case management, housing, and emergency funds for people who serve
- Providing high-quality healthcare and child care assistance to those who serve
- Investing in connections for recent high school and college graduates into national service

**E. National service should build pathways to long-term success for individuals who serve through benefits and connections to future education and careers.**

National service has the potential to create a dynamic workforce that meets the needs of a 21st century economy. Service that is accessible to all young Americans and is built to provide skills and support that help those who serve thrive in jobs or education after their service will create a stronger, more diverse workforce.

Today, the college affordability crisis has left 70% of Americans with debt they are struggling to repay. COVID-19 has caused record levels of youth unemployment — with one in four young people out of work, their talents untapped. We envision a future in which young people earn college tuition by addressing challenges in local communities, in which they are empowered to shape their own future, regardless of their backgrounds. Investing in young Americans is investing in our economy.

This future requires commitment from higher education leaders and employers, as well as community leaders and elected officials at all levels of government.

To ensure that the next generation of young Americans are supported and on pathways to success through education and careers, *Serve America Together* will strive to advance policies including:

- Passing legislation that provides pathways to long-term success (education benefits, cash benefits, bonds, tax incentives, etc.)
  - Enable young Americans to earn college tuition through service
  - Increase the AmeriCorps education award
  - Protect and expand Public Service Loan Forgiveness program

- Creating employment incentives for national service (i.e. preferential hiring, non-competitive eligibility)
  - Encourage employers, including the federal government, to value service year experience in hiring
  - Connect national service to credentials with value in the employment marketplace
- Expanding education incentives for national service
- Protecting the Forever GI Bill
- Supporting civilian national service programs that decrease physical and educational barriers to military service
- Developing workforce development strategies and supports so service year corps members can build towards their career and education pathways post-service
- Recognizing service years as a “civic apprenticeship” that prepares young people for careers in nonprofits and civil society as well in public service