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The Role of Volunteer Resources Managers in the Serve America Act

By [Paula J. Beugen](#)

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Introduction from Susan J. Ellis, President, Energize, Inc.

Volunteer management practitioners in the United States are at a crossroads. After years of behind-the-scenes efforts, there is now a new law that authorizes great expansion of Federally-supported service programs, notably AmeriCorps and several new special Corps and initiatives. The Serve America Act is over 100 pages in length and funds still need to be appropriated. But it's clear that we'll all feel the impact in one way or another. Colleague Paula J. Beugen, based in Minnesota, has been following this legislation carefully for more than eight months. I doubt anyone has spent as much time as Paula has trying to learn about what is in the Act from the perspective of frontline volunteer resources management best practices. So I welcome her this month as Guest Writer of this Hot Topic (though I couldn't resist a bit of editorializing at the end!). I join her in urging all in our field to "serve America" by also serving our profession as advocates for the skills and expertise we offer and, of course, the volunteers we mobilize.

Amid exciting fanfare, including a tree planting service project, President Obama signed the bipartisan Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act (Public Law 111-13), on April 21, 2009, during National Volunteer Week.

Referring to the many programs found within in the Serve America Act, the President proclaimed:

Programs like these are a force multiplier; they leverage small numbers of [Corps] members into thousands of volunteers. And we will focus their service toward solving today's most pressing challenges: clean energy, energy efficiency, health care, education, economic opportunity, veterans and military families.

Even though the Serve America Act, in general, does not take effect until October 1, 2009, and the Congressional appropriations process was just getting under way at the writing of this piece, the Call to Service was formally or informally launched when the President said at the signing ceremony, "I ask every American to make an enduring commitment to serving your community and your country in whatever way you can."

Volunteer resources managers can seize this opportunity for concerted action to strengthen the volunteer community. The landscape for volunteerism and volunteer resources management is shifting through the heightened attention the Serve America Act is bringing to all forms of service. As a profession, we have a unique and strategic chance to influence effective implementation of the Act and ultimately the ability of the volunteer community to achieve intentional community results.

The Call to Service Campaign

The Serve America Act requires the Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation) to conduct a nationwide "Call to Service" campaign within 180 days after enactment of the Act.

The Act identifies a number of target populations to become engaged in specific ways, with the potential of increasing the diversity of the volunteer community as a whole and in many local organizations. The skills and talents of experienced leaders of volunteer programs will be needed more than ever to effectively and efficiently implement volunteer resources management best practices for success. Some volunteer populations emphasized in the Act include:

- People aged 55 and older; Baby Boomers
- Court-involved youth and adults who are re-engaging with the community
- Youth who are disadvantaged
- Students engaged in "Summers of Service" and "Semesters of Service"
- Military veterans
- AmeriCorps alumni
- Individuals with disabilities
- Professionals who volunteer their specialized skills
- Displaced workers
- Social entrepreneurs

Many of the above will receive post-service education awards, small stipends and/or living allowances as a part of various new or expanded Serve America Act programs.

Are volunteer resources managers already working with all or most of these populations? Will organizations adapt to welcome such diverse resources? How will they adapt?

Action Steps for Volunteer Resources Managers

Here's how I suggest you embark on the journey of exploring the Serve America Act and influence how it will ultimately have an impact. Even leaders of volunteers who were not involved in the development of the legislation can step forward now. Here are some steps that can be taken:

Learn as Much as You Can and Stay Up-to-Date

To get the complete text of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act:

1. Go to <https://www.congress.gov/>
2. In the search box,
enter: H.R. 1388
3. As of this writing, the Act is still in the process of publication. Once the Act is available in final form (as PL 111-13), you can click on the link to get the full text from the Government Printing Office (free online).

Meanwhile, you can look at the *6th version* of the bill H.R. 1388, which is the version of the bill that was passed by the U.S. Senate and U.S. House and signed by the President.

The Corporation for National and Community Service has provided a summary of highlights of the Act at: <http://www.nationalservice.gov/>

about/newsroom/

releases_detail.asp?tbl_pr_id=1283

- Read the Act and become familiar with its contents.
- Look for parts of the Act that may match your community, organization, volunteer program, and volunteers.
- Keep up with notices of funding opportunities on the Corporation for National and Community Service Web site at http://www.nationalservice.gov/for_organizations/funding/index.asp and through other sources.
- Follow the Federal Register and <http://www.grants.gov> to find potential funding opportunities as and if they become available.
- Stay up-to-date on your State Service Commission (locate yours at <http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/contact/statecommission.asp>) and its activities, priorities and intent to apply for particular pools of Serve America Act funds, including those that may be sub-granted.
- Learn about key player organizations in relationship to the Serve America Act.

Prepare Your Organization and Community

- Do an internal organizational analysis to determine what parts of the Act appear to be a fit with your volunteer program and community.
- Stay open-minded about new opportunities to enlarge the volunteer talent pool and consider ways to adapt your program and methods accordingly.
- Point out to your organization's top executives how new or expanded programs through the Act are a fit with the mission of your organization and its engagement of volunteers.
- Initiate related conversations with current volunteers, staff, consumers/constituents, policymakers, community leaders, state and local units of government, business leaders, foundation representatives and other volunteerism stakeholders.
- Start building relationships with potential partner organizations and individuals, and begin searching for sources of matching funds that may be required. If you do this right away, you will be more prepared when opportunities present themselves.
- In the case that a fit or allocation cannot be found through the Serve America Act, look for other funding sources, partners and ways to accomplish proactive work to advance important mission-driven and leadership goals.
- Look for opportunities to provide public testimony or input on how to incorporate best practices in volunteer resources management into Serve America activities in order to help shape the quality and results of national, state and local efforts.
- Get in on the ground floor of relevant and timely efforts or join these efforts as early-on as possible!

What else on this topic requires discussion or action by volunteer resources managers? Let's get the conversation going! See our questions for discussion below.

Sections of the Serve America Act that Need Our Vigilance

By Susan J. Ellis, President, Energize, Inc.

It is far too early to know exactly what the impact of the Serve America Act will be, which is why Paula's advice about educating ourselves as to its provisions is so important. One thing we do know: volunteering and service of all sorts are getting a lot of attention and, in fact, many volunteer programs are already experiencing a surge in applications.

As always, I am willing to raise some provocative questions – not to be negative or ornery, but because this is an extraordinary opportunity to really advocate for our profession. From their potential impact on the field of volunteer management, here are some aspects of the new legislation that I believe deserve close observation as they become real:

- The Act directs the Corporation for National and Community Service to deploy AmeriCorps members into positions that will leverage more community volunteers. In other words, agencies will expect AmeriCorps to become a source for volunteer program development. Will this impact the type of Corps member recruited to fill these specialized positions? Who will provide what training in how to be a volunteer resources manager? What will happen to an

embryo volunteer effort when the AmeriCorps member leaves? Will increased engagement of AmeriCorps members as volunteer coordinators substitute for future commitments to the employment of professional, ongoing volunteer resources managers?

- One initiative is the “Volunteer Management Corps” – a misnomer in that it is not about “volunteer management” but rather about expertise volunteered to help in the management of nonprofit agencies.
- New projects are proposed as “service-learning” through all schools (though emphasizing grades 6 to 12) and post-secondary institutions, with most of the emphasis on the education side of the equation. It’s unclear whether funds or training will be available for the agencies that will provide these student placements.
- Money is slotted for a “Social Innovation Funds pilot program” and a “Nonprofit Capacity Building Program,” as well as for research studies of various aspects of service. The language is vague and we should watch whether there will be open competition for the funds or whether they will, in essence, be earmarked for certain pass-through recipients.
- Most of the new and expanded programs under the Act include post-service education awards, stipends (possibly seen as token pay), and/or living allowances for participants. What will be the effect of so many new programs offering some form of reimbursement or compensation on attitudes towards volunteering without a monetary component?

So...now it's *your* turn:

- What are your expectations of the Serve America Act?
- Do you have anything to add to Paula's action steps and/or Susan's sections that need our vigilance?
- What else should be done?

(And if you're one of our many international visitors, please feel free to join the discussion with any relevant experiences in your country.)

Related Topics: [National Service](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Government Relations/Codes](#) | [Legislation](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Submitted 2 June 2009 by Kate M. Burggraff, President, Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA), MN USA

MAVA, representing leaders of volunteers in MN, has submitted both verbal and written testimony to the Corporation for National & Community Service regarding the implementation of the Kennedy Serve America Act through the Listening Session in New Orleans on May 28th. The written testimony has just been posted on the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration website at <http://www.mavanetwork.org/serveamerica>. Without the input and expertise of leaders of volunteers, a needed perspective in volunteerism will be missing!

Submitted on 30 May 2009 by Hillary Roberts, PLNJ Inc. - Blankie Depot, President, Keyport/NJ USA

'This is all happening as volunteer resource managers' jobs are being eliminated here in NYC.'

Jerry-Sadly, not just in NYC. A lack of responses here may very well be indicative of a decline in VRM positions across the country. The decision to cut VRM posts was never more ironic than at a time when our most noted political voices stand behind national service and community volunteerism promoting engagement.

Who is suppose to lead new recruits if professional leadership positions are cut? Where are VRM's suppose to turn to KEEP their jobs?

Following along with the new "plan" is only beneficial for those who are given the opportunity to have an active voice while still working in the field of non profit. Sideline advocates are typically given a pat on the head.

Consider this:VRM's are being pushed out of the very field they populate.

Submitted on 29 May 2009 by Gerald (Jerry) Pannozzo, CVA, NYMH and KJMC

Program/Training Coordinator, Grant Coordinator/Consultant, New York, New York United States

I want to thank Susan and Paula for highlighting this topic and making the information easy to get to. I'm concerned with the limited response to this topic; however, much is happening with regard to the world of volunteer resources management. Here in NYC we are also exploring the mayor's initiative, NYC Service: A Blueprint To Increase Civic Engagement (60 pages).

We recently focused on the Serve America Act at our NYAVA new members/members breakfast. We incorporated several links provided by Susan (within her website) that members read "before" attending the meeting. We were able to provide a venue for colleagues to come together and kick around the pros and cons. It proved to be a lively conversation! This is all happening as volunteer resource managers' jobs are being eliminated here in NYC.

I try to remain optimistic about the Serve America Act since it is shining a spotlight on volunteering and on the issue of managing volunteers. I hope our new national professional organization will be able to get a seat at the table and "educate up" regarding best practices, sustaining programs, etc. I don't have any additions to Paula's actions steps because I'm still trying to carve out time to "read" all the links. With regard to "What else should be done?" – keep sharing information and raising the questions! Again, thank you both.

Update from Susan, 15 May 2009

First, let me encourage readers to post responses here! The whole point of Paula's essay was to urge us to get engaged. Sharing thoughts here is one way to reach a wide spectrum of colleagues.

The Corporation for National and Community Service has created ways to elicit input on the Serve America Act. The [Federal Register Notice](#) for May 4 explains the options and the Corporation has put up an [explanation and and links](#) to the different forums. There are 4 live hearings still being held before the end of the month in scattered locations. The most direct form of input is to submit your

thoughts electronically via e-mail to ServeAmericaAct@cns.gov or online through <http://www.nationalservice.gov/feedback/serveact/>.

Submitted on 7 May 2009 by Paula Beugen

There is so much to be said about the Serve America Act that I am writing about it in several different ways and forums. A new 12-page article, "Exploring the Serve America Act," has just been posted to the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration's Web site (MAVA, www.mavanetwork.org). As part of my contribution to MAVA's Public Affairs efforts, I will continue to offer more information on that site over time.

***Submitted on 4 May 2009 by Linnea Goldfield , Volunteer Coordinator,
Somers Point, NJ USA***

I am a Volunteer Coordinator for a Hospice agency. It has been an invaluable tool in bringing sunshine into the patient's last days of life. While it's an enjoyable position, I'm having a difficult time contacting the over 55 age group and the AARP Chapters, even though I've tried to contact them by phone and mail. The volunteers require 14 hours of free training, and it often turns off potential volunteers who just want to dig in and begin their tasks. I feel that President Obama's Volunteer program is an excellent one, one that not only brings experience and possibly job opportunities to those in high school and college, but it helps young adults grow and appreciate what it feels like to give of themselves, changing them into more compassionate and open-minded adults.

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