



**Productive Engagement Early in Life:  
Civic and Volunteer Service as a Pathway to Development**

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GRAND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORK INITIATIVE

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Grand Challenge: *Advance Long and Productive Lives*

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# GRAND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORK INITIATIVE

The Grand Challenges for Social Work are designed to focus a world of thought and action on the most compelling and critical social issues of our day. Each grand challenge is a broad but discrete concept where social work expertise and leadership can be brought to bear on bold new ideas, scientific exploration and surprising innovations.

We invite you to review the following challenges with the goal of providing greater clarity, utility and meaning to this roadmap for lifting up the lives of individuals, families and communities struggling with the most fundamental requirements for social justice and human existence.

The Grand Challenges for Social Work include the following:

- Ensure healthy development of all youth
- Close the health gap
- Stop family violence
- Eradicate social isolation
- End homelessness
- Promote smart decarceration
- Reduce extreme economic inequality
- Build financial capability for all
- Harness technology for social good
- Create social responses to a changing environment
- Achieve equal opportunity and justice
- Advance long and productive lives

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# Productive Engagement Early in Life: Civic and Volunteer Service as a Pathway to Development

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Globalization and information-age technology have led to declines in labor market opportunity, especially for youth. In this paper, we suggest a robust emphasis on civic and volunteer service as one promising policy response. Service can promote civic engagement, meaningful roles in society, and work experience, while making substantial contributions to social and economic well-being. The classic historical example is the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) created by President Franklin Roosevelt during the Depression of the 1930s. The CCC was enormously productive and enjoyed strong bipartisan political support. In order to re-create this potential, policies for civic and volunteer service should be designed and implemented. To ensure that all Americans have access to the benefits of service, we recommend a fivefold increase over the next decade in the size of civic service programs such as city and state conservation corps, AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, and other, similar programs. We also recommend expanding inclusive pathways to civic and volunteer service for children and youth in education. As in the past, the social work profession can provide leadership in building these policies. Social workers also have vital roles to play in conducting research to inform more effective policy and practice.

Key words: civic engagement, civic service, employment, Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative, social development, volunteer service

Historically, the United States has been a leader in developing and implementing policies that promote civic and volunteer service (Ellis & Campbell, 2006; McChrystal, 2016). As early as 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville (2010) noted the high rate of civic engagement among Americans. In 1910, William James proposed national service, a peaceful equivalent to military service, as a “moral equivalent of war.” In 1944, Arthur Schlesinger famously declared America a “nation of joiners” (p. 1), a moniker he based on citizens’ strong sense of volunteer engagement as well as national policies that support widespread civic participation.

Since the 1930s, the United States has sponsored three large-scale civic service programs. The first and largest was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Between 1933 and 1942, the CCC enrolled three million young people, mostly men, in conservation work throughout the United States. During that period, the CCC built much of the infrastructure in state and national parks (Sherraden, 1979). It was the largest tree-planting effort in the history of the United States (Eberly & Sherraden, 1990; Sherraden, 1979). The second was the U.S. Peace Corps, created by President John F. Kennedy in 1961. The Corps sent volunteers overseas for a 2-year term of service to promote peace and friendship with other nations. Over the last 50 years, the Peace Corps has sent more than 220,000 volunteers on assignments abroad. In 2015 alone, 7,000 volunteers were

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dispatched to 63 countries (Peace Corps, 2016a).<sup>1</sup> The third large-scale service program is AmeriCorps, created by President William J. Clinton in 1994. AmeriCorps annually places more than 75,000 individuals (mostly youth and young adults) in service. Through a variety of programs, men and women serve in 21,000 communities and in all 50 U.S. states (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016).<sup>2</sup>

Although it has been a leader in this area, the United States is not alone in its enthusiasm for civic service. Around the world, governmental and nongovernmental organizations place volunteers in communities to provide health care, food and nutrition assistance, education, housing, and legal counsel, as well as support for energy conservation, environmental restoration, and construction of housing (United Nations Volunteers, 2011, 2015). The United Nations Volunteers program is a global initiative with a threefold mission: to mobilize volunteers, advocate for volunteerism and civic engagement, and pursue the integration of volunteers across policy contexts to achieve global development goals. The program estimates that more than one billion people across the globe provide service and most of them do so in their own countries (United Nations Volunteers, 2015). The work of these dedicated volunteers reduces extreme poverty, curbs climate change, curtails environmental degradation, and tackles social injustice in pursuit of equitable and sustainable development (United Nations Volunteers, 2015).

In this paper, we focus on the potential to expand service to reach all young people in the United States. We define civic and volunteer service as “an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant” (Sherraden, 2001a, p. 5).<sup>3</sup> We offer two proposals that can be achieved in a decade’s time:

- Advance service as a substantial, essential, and sustainable social institution in the 21st century. This can be achieved by expanding access to civic- and volunteer-service opportunities in elementary, secondary, and higher education, and by providing multiple and inclusive pathways to civic engagement for all children and youth.
- Promote a fivefold increase in the capacity of civic- and volunteer-service programs—such as local and state conservation corps, AmeriCorps, and the Peace Corps—that engage people in a sustained period of service at some point in their life.

In the following sections, we specify the rationales for these proposals as well as a framework for making service a practical and desirable choice at any stage of life. In the first section, we

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<sup>1</sup> The Peace Corps is an independent government agency overseen by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> AmeriCorps is the largest of four programs managed by the Corporation for National and Community Service, a U.S. federal agency. AmeriCorps now includes a number of smaller programs such as FEMA Corps (in partnership with the Federal Emergency Management Agency), AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps), and School Turnaround AmeriCorps.

<sup>3</sup> The term *volunteers*, often used in referring to individuals, includes those participating in civic service as well as those engaged in informal volunteering, mutual help, caring for relatives, helping neighbors, and church work (United Nations Volunteers, 2011). However, this paper focuses on formal modes of civic and volunteer service that are structured and constitute substantial engagement over a period of time. Much of the research on civic and volunteer service includes all types of volunteering.

examine why advancing service is a constructive policy in a world with declining labor market opportunity. We then review the considerable evidence that volunteering is good for people's livelihoods, health, and personal growth; that it spurs civic and social engagement; and that it leads to improvements in economic and social development. We conclude with a discussion of the next steps required to realize the potential of civic and volunteer service for everyone.

### **CIVIC AND VOLUNTEER SERVICE IN A WORLD OF PRESSING NEEDS AND DECLINING LABOR-MARKET OPPORTUNITIES**

Service can play a distinctive and substantive role in addressing social, economic, political, and environmental challenges in the United States and around the world. Most notably, service can function as a counterweight to declining labor market opportunities. During the 20th century, earning a living through work was the cornerstone of household and societal well-being. With the rise in globalization and growth of information technology, this cornerstone has developed worrisome cracks. Today we live in a world of declining labor market participation, especially among youth. Increasing automation threatens millions of low-wage and low-skilled jobs, contributing to growing inequality (Frey & Osborne, 2013; Thompson, 2015). Already, these effects are apparent. The proportion of the working-age adult civilian population in jobs (the employment-to-population ratio) has steadily declined from 65% in 2000 to below 60% in 2015 (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.). In addition, the share of U.S. economic output paid in wages is at its lowest level since the U.S. government began keeping track in the mid-20th century (Thompson, 2015). In simple terms, fewer people are working, and workers are taking home less of the economic product.

The effects of these trends are particularly acute among young people. In the United States and in other countries, youth face an increasingly difficult transition to adulthood. The labor market—a traditional pathway from childhood to adulthood—has pulled away from youth. For example, 2.6 million youth aged 16 to 24 were unemployed in the United States in 2016; that is, they were looking for work but unable to find it (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Millions of other young people are incarcerated or have given up looking for work (and are not counted among the officially unemployed). In some countries, over 50% of the youth population is unemployed (International Labour Organization, 2015; World Bank, n.d.). According to one measure, around one in seven young people are not working or in school; this challenge leads youth to feel highly disconnected from society (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2015).

These patterns raise troubling questions, and one is key: How can millions of young people transition successfully into adult roles, support their families, and contribute to their communities? Evidence suggests that fundamental economic changes require supplemental and alternative pathways to a stable adult life (Frey & Osborne, 2013; Thompson, 2015). One important pathway is civic and volunteer service (Stein & Sagawa, 2016).

History offers important lessons. During the 1930s, when millions were out of work and shoved to the edge of the economy, President Roosevelt personally conceived the CCC to employ young men in useful conservation work. The more than 6.5 million workdays contributed by these 16,000-plus men resulted in multiple improvements to national parks, including hundreds of new

campgrounds, bridges, roads, dams, and other infrastructure projects (Salmond, 1967). As one observer wrote near the end of the CCC:

There is no doubt that the program has given great impetus to the state park movement throughout the country, and that it has been largely responsible for the increase in state park acreage by almost one hundred per cent since 1933 (Caravati, 1941, p. 651).

In addition to its major contributions to the nation’s physical infrastructure, the CCC promoted the economic well-being and health of its enrollees. Observers at the time and researchers since then have maintained that the CCC supported millions of youth and their families, reduced juvenile crime, prepared many young people for military service during World War II, and successfully promoted the idea of conservation (Lanpher, 1941; Salmond, 1967; S. Doc. No. 216 (1942); Sherraden, 1979; *To Make the Civilian Conservation Corps*, 1937).<sup>4</sup>

Harry Hopkins, a social worker and architect of federal relief efforts, recognized the value of these programs. He consistently advocated for a policy strategy that combined participation in work relief with support for basic subsistence—a policy strategy to preserve dignity. Reflecting on WPA participants, Hopkins observed: “The things they have actually accomplished all over America should be an inspiration to every reasonable person and an everlasting answer to all the grievous insults that have been heaped on the heads of the unemployed” (quoted in Taylor, 2008, pp. 234–235).

### **BENEFITS OF CIVIC AND VOLUNTEER SERVICE FOR VOLUNTEERS AND COMMUNITIES**

Civic and volunteer service is not merely a feel good activity of occasional good work; it offers substantial benefits to volunteers and the communities they serve (Opportunity Nation, 2014). As Amitai Etzioni (1990, p. x) observed years ago, “The beauty” of civic service “is its ability to serve two or more functions simultaneously” by allowing volunteers to “do more” and “grow in profound ways.” Research documents four key areas in which the outcomes of service are influential: livelihoods, health and personal growth, civic and social engagement, and economic and social development.<sup>5</sup> The research on civic- and volunteer-service outcomes frequently does not distinguish clearly between civic service and volunteering, including informal voluntary activities. As a result, the sections that follow include evidence about the outcomes of all types of service.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The CCC also had major shortcomings. Discrimination against women and people of color has been documented, and the program did not succeed in promoting education and training (Sherraden, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Outcomes of civic and volunteer service also have been reviewed in Sherraden, Lough, and McBride (2008), as well as in *Increasing Productive Engagement in Later Life*, Working Paper 8 in the Grand Challenges initiative’s series (Morrow-Howell et al., 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Sorting out outcomes and impacts of different types of civic and volunteer service requires much more research attention. In particular, research should examine impacts on participants and on communities where they serve.

## Livelihoods

Civic and volunteer service has the potential to strengthen livelihoods by building skills and providing pathways to employment, particularly pathways for young people (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007, 2015; Spera, Ghertner, Nerino, & DiTommaso, 2013). As noted earlier, youth service is associated with job readiness. It exposes young people to new career pathways, helping them to formulate career plans and guiding them to develop critical skills needed for success in the workplace (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Ramson, 2014; Sherraden & Eberly, 1982). It is also linked to success in acquiring employment through broadened access to the social networks, knowledge, and skills that constitute human capital (Antoni, 2009, p. 14). Such capital can “level the playing field” for those who find it difficult to obtain employment, especially during tough economic times (Spera et al., 2013, p. 23).

Service may be particularly valuable in enabling the long-term unemployed to secure future work (Hirst, 2001). In addition to increasing awareness of career opportunities, service can help people develop social and verbal skills for jobs in such growing employment sectors as health care, physical and life sciences, architecture and engineering, social assistance, construction, education, business, and finance (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007; Jones, 2005; Longenecker, Beard, & Scazzero, 2012; Patel, 2009; Sherraden & Eberly, 1982; Spera et al., 2013; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011).

To be sure, some young people pursue service opportunities to gain college admission and improve employment prospects (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002), but the impacts of engaging in volunteerism extend far beyond a line on a resume. Prosocial motivations for volunteering are particularly important for the millennial generation, whose members report a strong desire to contribute in a meaningful way to society (Ballard, 2014; Neufeind, Jiranek, & Wehner, 2014).

## Health and Personal Growth

People who serve as volunteers benefit physically and psychologically. The benefits include improvements in psychological and mental well-being (Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007), self-esteem (Musick & Wilson, 2003), social integration (Piliavin, 2003), and overall mental and physical health (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Van Willigen, 2000) as well as decreased anxiety and depression (Musick & Wilson, 2003). Civic and volunteer service can benefit people by kindling personal transformations in values, motivations, and personality (Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Meyers, 2009). As a result, volunteers report higher life satisfaction than people who do not volunteer (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Van Willigen, 2000).

Some evidence suggests that the social and psychological benefits of volunteering are greater for individuals with low levels of education or income, rural populations, and members of racial or ethnic minority groups (Spera et al., 2013; Sundeen, Raskoff, & Garcia, 2007). For example, volunteers who are members of racial or ethnic minority groups derive a greater sense of self-reliance and autonomy from their service experiences. Moreover, they learn in volunteering to disassociate from negative labels and stereotypes linked to racial and ethnic identities (McBride & Lough, 2010; Wilson, 2000).



## Civic and Social Engagement

Heightened levels of volunteering are associated with a number of positive social and economic outcomes that extend beyond the personal benefits noted above (Opportunity Nation, 2014). Service is positively associated with active participation, civic responsibility, and contributions to community well-being (Blurr, Caro, & Moorhead, 2002; Lough & Matthew, 2014; Mohan, 1994), cohesive communities and community organizations (Bloom & Kilgore, 2003; United Nations Volunteers, 2011), and political engagement (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2001; Tossutti, 2003). Evidence from Learn and Serve America, a program funded through the Corporation for National and Community Service (1993–2011),<sup>7</sup> suggests that volunteers contribute substantially to people’s engagement with their communities (Melchior et al., 1999). Young people who participate in service learning tend to be more involved in civic affairs than do counterparts who lack service-learning exposure (Pritzker & Metzger, 2011). In comparison with nonparticipants, participants in school-based volunteer programs express greater interest in their community and are more likely to believe that they could make a difference (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006). In international contexts, service participants learn how to live and work with others. They learn about the diverse conditions in which people live, and they develop the sense that they have a responsibility to become engaged in international activities (Jorgenson, 2009; Mohan, 1994; Wilson & Musick, 1999).

## Economic and Social Development

Civic and volunteer service contributes to economic and social development. In 2015, the economic value of volunteering to U.S. society was estimated at \$184 billion (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2015). Compared with nonvolunteers, volunteers contribute more money to philanthropic causes (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). They report that they give *because* their volunteer experiences have exposed them to people and organizations in need (Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund, 2015).

Economic benefits are not the only contributions made by civic and volunteer service. For example, youth in the CCC reforested 90,000 acres in 5 years during the Great Depression (Sherraden, 1979). Decades later, AmeriCorps members mobilized the efforts of nearly three million other community-based volunteers to serve in organizations and communities (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016). In human service agencies, volunteers augment the delivery of services and contribute to organizational development and productivity (Jamison, 2003; Netting, Nelson, Borders, & Huber, 2004).

Moreover, service contributes to the realization of the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (Haddock & Devereux, 2015; Lough, 2016). Volunteers have been recognized by the United Nations General Assembly as a powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation to achieve these global goals.<sup>8</sup> International service also illuminates issues facing marginalized communities, encouraging government action and accountability (United Nations Volunteers,

<sup>7</sup> Service-learning is “a teaching strategy that explicitly links community-service experiences to classroom instruction” (Billig, 2000, p. 660).

<sup>8</sup> G.A. Res. 70/129 (Dec. 17, 2015), [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/129](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/129).

2015). International volunteers who work with people from different cultural backgrounds generate international understanding (Caprara, Mati, Obadare, & Perold, 2013; Lough & Mati, 2012; Spence, 2006).

### IMPROVING ACCESS TO CIVIC AND VOLUNTEER SERVICE

Despite the demonstrated benefits of civic and volunteer service to those who serve, and to the communities and societies where they serve, not everyone has access to the opportunity to participate in service. In this section, we examine differential rates of serving and explanations for these differences.

Overall, rates of civic and volunteer service differ across social groups, with more privileged members of society being more likely to engage in service (Institute for Volunteering Research, 2005; McBride & Lough, 2010). In the United States, White non-Hispanics with high education and high income are the most likely to volunteer (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Lough, 2015; Parboteeah, Cullen, & Lim, 2004). In contrast, rates of volunteering are particularly low among racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation immigrants, and people with low income (Lee & Pritzker, 2013; Musick, Wilson, & Bynum, 2000; Wilson, 2000). Further, volunteering is twice as common among young people attending college as among counterparts not in college (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2015).

There are many explanations for why some groups serve less than others. One commonly offered explanation is that significant opportunity costs, monetary costs as well as nonmonetary ones, impede participation in service (McBride, Gonzales, Morrow-Howell, & McCrary, 2011; Perry & Thomson, 2007), particularly participation by economically disadvantaged groups. Time spent volunteering cannot be spent earning income. This consideration may not significantly influence service decisions by individuals with relatively high income, but counterparts with relatively low income may find it difficult to forego earnings in order to serve. In addition, other financial costs are often associated with civic and volunteer service. For example, volunteers typically pay for their own transportation, child care, and food while away from home. Among the nonmonetary opportunity costs is the time allocated for service; that time cannot be spent with family or allocated for meeting other obligations such as shopping and cleaning. Families with relatively high income may be able to offset some of these obligations through costly time-saving arrangements not available to lower income counterparts. For example, well-to-do parents can free up time by paying a housekeeper and a nanny to perform some household functions. Low-income parents cannot.

A second, commonly mentioned explanation for differences in rates of service is that groups differ in their access to meaningful service opportunities (Hyman & Levine, 2008): Some simply have less access to institutions that facilitate and encourage service. For example, schools that provide and facilitate service opportunities are not as prevalent in disadvantaged communities as in privileged ones (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Similarly, most colleges promote service, but the chances of attending higher education and completing a degree are lower among youth from disadvantaged communities than among youth from relatively more advantaged places (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Moreover, college students from low-income backgrounds often have jobs and little time for service (Perold et al., 2013; Simonet, 2009).

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Third, whether one is *asked to participate* in service can influence whether one serves. Some groups are asked less than others and so are less likely to volunteer (Hall & Wilton, 2011; Trembath, Balandin, Stancliffe, & Togher, 2010; Wilson, 2000). Overall, White Americans, individuals with more education, and people with more economic resources are more likely to participate in organizations that ask them to volunteer (Musick et al., 2000). To illustrate, college students—who are more likely to be White and economically advantaged—are regularly asked (or required) to volunteer. Their likelihood of volunteering is nearly twice that of nonstudents—who are more likely to be non-White and economically disadvantaged (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2015). Higher education institutions—especially elite schools—also are gateways to service programs such as AmeriCorps and Peace Corps. Liberal arts institutions are more likely than community colleges to require service as part of a degree (Gray, Ondaatje, & Zakaras, 1999).

Finally, social and cultural expectations, traditions, social relationships, and individual life experiences also influence who volunteers (Matsuba, Hart, & Atkins, 2007; Yeung, 2004), but people are less likely to serve if service opportunities are lacking (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Because the positive impacts of volunteering are not accessible to all, we as a society forego the potentially positive impact of extending volunteer opportunities to everyone, particularly underprivileged groups. Therefore, civic- and volunteer-service policies and programs should take into account people's diverse social and economic circumstances (Hong, Morrow-Howell, Tang, & Hinterlong, 2009; McBride & Lough, 2010) and reach out to those who are disadvantaged.

### **INCLUSIVE CIVIC AND VOLUNTEER SERVICE: POLICY AND PROGRAM DESIGN**

Creating inclusive pathways to civic and volunteer service throughout life requires policies and programs to enhance access and reach more people (Hutchison & Ockenden, 2008; Zimmeck, 2010). In this section, we examine policies that can promote inclusion by expanding access to service opportunities.

Research identifies three design elements that foster inclusion in civic and volunteer service (Hong et al., 2009; McBride, Greenfield, Morrow-Howell, Lee, & McCrary, 2012): *availability* of volunteer positions, *flexibility* of service assignments and time commitments, and *desirability* of service roles.

First, in order to reach more people, service opportunities must be *available* in every community (Hong et al., 2009). In particular, service opportunities should be available in schools, churches, places of employment, and community-based organizations that reach underserved groups (Musick et al., 2000). For instance, faith-based institutions could offer service opportunities for volunteers of all ages and from all walks of life (Campbell & Yonish, 2003; Hustinx, Von Essen, Haers, & Mels, 2015; Lough, 2015). Some employers offer service opportunities that could reach disadvantaged groups (Aluchna, 2015; Booth & Rodell, 2015). Currently, however, opportunities to serve are clustered in well-paying jobs and tend to reach individuals with privilege or education (Cláudia Nave & Do Paço, 2013; Henning & Jones, 2013).

Second, service opportunities will reach underserved groups if they are *flexible*, accommodating differences in volunteers' capacity and availability (Hong et al., 2009). This flexibility might

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come in program eligibility requirements and screening procedures as well as in willingness to accommodate work obligations, child care availability, and other constraints. For example, the Peace Corps launched an initiative to recruit volunteers aged 50 and over. The initiative allowed greater flexibility in times served, choice of country, type of work, and opportunities to return home. As a result, the percentage of Peace Corps volunteers over the age of 50 increased from 5% in 2005 to 7% in 2015 (Peace Corps, 2016a, 2016b). Similarly, AmeriCorps offers flexible service opportunities that allow young people to volunteer part-time while engaged in school and work. Flexibility allows more people to participate and leads to higher service-completion rates (McBride et al., 2012).

Third, service programs can appeal to more people by offering opportunities that are perceived as *desirable*. Financial incentives, including education awards, such as stipends, scholarships, and loan forgiveness and repayment, increase the desirability of service opportunities, particularly among potential volunteers from underserved communities (McBride et al., 2011; Morrow-Howell, Hong, & Tang, 2009; Tschirhart, Mesch, Perry, Miller, & Lee, 2001). Such compensation offsets some opportunity costs of service and can be particularly important for people with low incomes (Lough & Sherraden, 2012; Perold et al., 2013; Simonet, 2009). The Peace Corps (2014), for example, offers volunteers a living stipend; full medical and dental coverage; two vacation days each month; assistance in transitioning back home after service; 1 year of noncompetitive advantage for federal employment positions; and student loan assistance, deferment, and forgiveness. Likewise, AmeriCorps graduates are exempt from the lengthy and competitive hiring process for government jobs, and some receive up to \$6,000 in education awards after completing their service (Corporation for National and Community Service, n.d.).

The policy effects of the three design features are now clearly established: Service programs have encouraged participation through program-design elements that make service available, flexible, and desirable. However, these improvements are not easy to implement, and they have budgetary implications. Commitment and resources are required. Empirical evidence of positive impacts can play a strong role in achieving effective policy design. In the next section, we recommend two approaches that will promote inclusive and universal access to civic and volunteer service.

### **REVITALIZE CIVIC AND VOLUNTEER SERVICE AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

We propose advancing civic and volunteer service as a common, inclusive, productive, and sustainable social institution for the 21st century. High youth unemployment and difficulty in transitioning to adulthood call for efforts to give youth alternative ways of engaging in society and obtaining work and life skills. Evidence clearly demonstrates that youth benefit from service. We also know that civic and volunteer service makes valuable contributions to communities and society as a whole. Recognizing these benefits, we assert that it is important to engage people early in life. As noted earlier, children and youth who volunteer are more likely to serve later in life, effectively multiplying the benefits of volunteer service over their lifetime. We also assert that there is a need to enhance institutional opportunities for service—especially opportunities

for vulnerable groups who stand to benefit most from service's positive effects on livelihoods and future employment, health and personal growth, and civic and social engagement.

To realize the potential of inclusive civic and volunteer service, the nation should create multiple and inclusive pathways that enable all children and youth to engage in such efforts. Although service is already well rooted in some elementary, secondary, and tertiary education systems, as well as in public, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations, the opportunity to serve is not equally available to everyone. Engaging people across the life span in meaningful service will ensure that everyone benefits from the substantial and documented positive outcomes from service.

We propose a fivefold increase in the capacity of civic- and volunteer-service programs to extend service opportunities to more Americans. As mentioned, state and local conservation corps, AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, and other civic-service programs are effective and popular. They can be expanded to include everyone with a desire to participate in a sustained service role (Service Year Alliance, n.d.). Complementing traditional education, a year or two of service could take place before, in the middle of, or after a period of education and training, or between jobs.<sup>9</sup> These experiences offer people opportunities to learn practical skills and apply what they are learning in the real world while also exploring career options (Jones, 2004; Martin, 2010). Such service experience can be an effective lever for determining future employment and building a richer life (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007; Opportunity Nation, 2014). Moreover, participants would contribute to important local, state, and national priorities: relief and recovery efforts after natural disasters, conservation and environmental restoration, cross-cultural understanding, education, health and well-being, child and older adult care, and other areas currently underserved by market mechanisms (McChrystal, 2016).

### **SOCIAL WORK LEADERSHIP IN CIVIC AND VOLUNTEER SERVICE**

Social workers have played key roles in the expansion of civic and volunteer service in the United States. They were leading figures in the creation and development of the CCC, VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), Peace Corps, and AmeriCorps (Eberly & Sherraden, 1990). In the 21st century, the social work profession can take a renewed leadership role in building inclusive service opportunities. The profession can also engage proactively in research, policy, and effective practice.

Service has a natural home in social work. When participants are asked about their work, they commonly refer to their activities as social work, community-based work, human and social services, or social and economic development (Jones, 2004; McBride, Benítez, & Sherraden, 2003). Social work has the potential to enhance knowledge that informs policies and programs, driving them toward optimal service participation, engagement, and management. The profession also has the ability to help shape environments in which service will thrive.

As we have stated, a key question is how to ensure access and inclusion. However, these are core social work values, and the profession has considerable experience. Social workers know how to

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<sup>9</sup> These types of service experiences are sometimes termed *gap years*.

design service policies and programs for fair participation (Stephens, Breheny, & Mansvelt, 2015). Social workers can strengthen the availability, flexibility, and desirability of volunteer roles by advocating for the policies discussed herein—for example, encouraging volunteer service with offers of education awards and loan forgiveness those who volunteer. They can work with educational institutions to promote more inclusive and expansive volunteer pathways. Social workers can take leadership in research to strengthen knowledge about diverse forms of service and elaborate upon the implications of findings for continuing improvement in policy and program design. Although the family and community contexts play pivotal roles in developing a basis for inclusive service, public institutions have a significant role to play in creating the policy framework and providing resources for full inclusion.

By the end of the next decade, civic and volunteer service can make pivotal contributions in efforts to address many of the Grand Challenges for Social Work—for example, in the work to ensure the healthy development of youth, eradicate social isolation, and achieve of equal opportunity and justice. In collaboration with governments, educational institutions, private-sector organizations, and other cross-sector collaborators, social work and social work research have the opportunity to inform a policy agenda for service on a grand scale.

## CONCLUSION

Civic and volunteer service on a grand scale has the potential to bring people from diverse backgrounds together to promote the common good. It draws upon people’s goodwill and motivations to create positive social change. The universal values that drive service—solidarity as well as desire to contribute to well-being and to the common good—are foundational elements at the core of social work (United Nations Volunteers, 2011). “Habits of the heart,” such as empathy and concern for the welfare of others, can be instilled early in life and strengthened through lifelong service (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007).

As discussed in this working paper, the contributions of service can be substantial, and there are many historical examples of purposeful institutional change. Although existing sources of service are desirable, they have not been fully inclusive. At critical junctures in the past, social thinkers, researchers, and policy makers have taken in hand the task of altering the institutional landscape, and it is possible to do so again (Sherraden, 2001b). Greater public and private funding can extend service opportunities across ages and diverse social groups. For its part, the social work profession has an opportunity to assume leadership in renewing and revitalizing this social institution for the 21st century.

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