

Lunatic Cuts to Senior Volunteer Programs

Ideology has replaced common sense in the attempt by right wingers in Congress to destroy federal funding for senior volunteer programs across the country. This is especially so in the House of Representatives, where the new Tea Party members have intimidated the Republican leadership into indiscriminately cutting what they call “wasteful spending,” this being defined as any programs to which they are ideologically opposed.

Cutting Service Programs

So now we have HR 1, the Continuing Resolution for fiscal year 2011 passed by the House of Representatives on February 19, 2011, which eliminates \$1.4 billion in federal funds for programs that encourage people to serve in their communities. These include the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and the programs it administers, the Retired & Senior Volunteer Program, the Foster Grandparent Program, and the Senior Companion Program (collectively the “Senior Corps”) as well as AmeriCorps, VISTA, Habitat for Humanity, City Year, and Teach for America.

CNCS is an independent federal department in the Executive Branch. Senior Corps is a very important collection of programs under CNCS that is slated for elimination under HR 1. Ending CNCS programs would eliminate Senior Corps - resulting in the “firing” of more than 450,000 senior volunteers nationwide, depleting vital services to people, young and old, who rely on them.

These cuts make no sense. They are a prime example of a false economy – eliminating many human service programs to save a pittance in funds. Some examples:

In 2010, nearly 660 AmeriCorps members assigned to Habitat for Humanity helped recruit and supervise 200,000 community volunteers to build 3,600 homes for low-income families. Eliminating funding for AmeriCorps means Habitat for Humanity will find it difficult to finance projects and recruit volunteers. The result will be fewer houses built, all for a savings of about \$4 million.

Teach for America, losing its grant from AmeriCorps, means it would have to reduce by about 500 the corps of recent college graduates that it trains to help raise achievement in low-income schools. And the loss of the \$5,000 educational stipend for AmeriCorps participants at the end of their service would make recruiting more difficult. Total savings: \$11 million.

City Year has 1,800 trained young people working with at-risk students in school districts with high dropout rates in 20 cities. Their living expenses are paid for almost entirely with a grant the group receives from AmeriCorps. Without that money, City Year may have to shut down entirely. Total saving: \$21.5 million.

RSVP Essential for the City

In New York City, the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), created and operated since 1966 by the Community Service Society, delivers critical services throughout the five boroughs designed to meet pressing local needs. RSVP volunteers, ranging in age from 55 to 101, provide an invaluable service and save the city and service organizations millions of dollars. RSVP is an essential component of life for millions of New Yorkers. Every day, New York City's RSVP volunteers make a profound difference in their communities and improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers.

RSVP volunteers assist New Yorkers in gaining basic money management skills, mentor children of incarcerated parents and at-risk youth, reduce the rate of recidivism by assisting the formerly incarcerated in removing barriers to gainful employment, provide literacy services to children and adults, assist at soup kitchens and food pantries providing meals and food packages to the poor, and deliver meals and provide companionship to the homebound, among many other services.

The impact on New York City with the elimination of RSVP would be profound. In 2010, over 5,600 RSVP volunteers contributed close to one million hours of service. The program is tremendously cost-effective. The yearly cost in federal funding to field one RSVP volunteer is \$162. While the federal cost per volunteer hour is \$0.93, the value of the volunteers' hours, calculated at the minimum wage, exceeds \$7.2 million.

Elimination of RSVP from the federal budget would have an enormous impact on New York City: 144 health-related community organizations would lose the services of 1,840 RSVP volunteers; 134 social services programs would lose the services of 1,442 RSVP volunteers; and 68 community partners providing services for older adults would lose the services of 1,322 RSVP volunteers.

The elimination of CNCS and/or Senior Corps and the funds associated with those programs would have a drastic effect on millions of people all over the U.S., including our own communities in New York City. We must convey this message to New York's senators, Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, and to all member of the Senate to ensure that they reject the folly of these budget cuts.

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From the New York Amsterdam News
March 17 – March 23, 2011