

# AMERICORPS AND CORPORATE AMERICA

BY

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**A**t a ceremony on the south lawn of the White House in September, President Clinton inaugurated his national service initiative by signing into law the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. The legislation, which authorizes over \$300 million to support a service corps, school- and college-based service-learning programs, and senior volunteer initiatives, seeks to rekindle the ethic of "civic responsibility and the spirit of community" in America.

The program's centerpiece is AmeriCorps, which will provide educational opportunities to participants seventeen years of age and above who perform full or part-time service to the community. In addition to a limited wage, full-time participants will be el-

igible for a post-service award to be used for educational purposes. Eli Segal, Assistant to the President and Director of the Office of National Service, has been named CEO of the newly formed Corporation for National and Community Service.

Building on the Civilian Conservation Corps initiated by President Roosevelt and other conservation and urban corps programs, AmeriCorps calls for a diverse coalition of community members. Key to the successful implementation at the local level is the involvement of business. This raises the questions: What benefit can the business community gain from its participation? What role can business play in the President's national service initiative?

The promise of additional human resources that will address our country's unmet needs is in the interest of all sectors of American society, including business. Business has already recognized the need to reform our educational

system and has made a long-term commitment to the issue. AmeriCorps participants, who provide direct educational service, are a part of the solution.

AmeriCorps' challenge is to have a positive and significant impact on the problems which it seeks to address. People and money alone are not the answer. It will have to be driven by local needs in close partnership with those in the community who have been addressing and are affected

by these problems. Communities will need to leverage carefully AmeriCorps' resources in order to build upon existing efforts and to create new ones when needed.

What is the benefit to business? America's youth need additional skills and knowledge, as well as the requisite sense of maturing and responsibility, to make successful transitions from school to work. An intense service experience can build upon schooling through practical hands-on experience in a real world setting. Through participation in service projects, young people will identify and analyze problems, develop and manage projects to address the problems, and evaluate the results. By serving in teams, they will learn how to cooperate and work productively with colleagues from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. And they will learn the value and practice of civic participation. As business becomes increasingly involved as partners in addressing social issues, and its employees as volunteers in the community, a future employee already well rounded in skills, abilities, and social commitment will be an asset.

How can business become involved? The human resources of the business sector are invaluable. Loaned executives can consult on administration, accounting, and human resource development; employee volunteers working alongside AmeriCorps participants can be role models, increase the impact of their work and assist with the "service-to-work transition." In-kind contributions, such as the use of company facilities, equipment, and access to training activities and expertise, can help programs achieve optimum results.

Because the legislation requires that program applicants provide a small cash match, business will be asked to help at the local level. The highly successful model program, Boston's City Year, an urban service corps, has enjoyed the financial support of its corps members by Boston area businesses. Companies such as The Timberland Company, the Bank of Boston, Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Massachusetts, Cabot Corporation/DistriGas, and Continental Cable Vision have each sponsored a team of City Year corps members who sport company logos on their uniforms.

Businesses concerned about how AmeriCorps programs will affect their existing investments in the community can help leverage these new human resources to enhance their yield. Opportunities for innovative partnerships will abound. With the advent of AmeriCorps, we have a chance to demonstrate the truly significant impact national service can have on our communities and the nation as a whole. Business has much to gain from this opportunity. Its active participation, building on its experience with community service and employee volunteerism, will be a vital link in the success of this effort.

