

## New bill should update AmeriCorps to reflect our times

### Juleyka Lantigua

AmeriCorps needs to be updated for our times. A bill just approved by Congress doesn't go far enough.

Since AmeriCorps was founded by President Clinton in 1993, 540,000 members have served with thousands of nonprofit organizations, public agencies and faith-based organizations nationwide. Among many other things, members tutor and mentor youth, build affordable housing, clean parks and streams, and recruit, train and manage community volunteers, and coordinate after-school programs.

In exchange, volunteers receive a very modest monetary award they can use toward college or qualified student loans. During their term of

service, volunteers are also provided training, student loan deferment, health care, and in about half the cases, a modest annual living allowance.

The bill that is on its way to President Obama's desk contains a few major changes: It increases volunteers to 250,000 from 75,000 annually, and bumps the education allowance to match the amount given by a Pell education grant (\$5,350). The areas of service will also be expanded to include education, veterans' affairs, health care, and renewable energy.

More needs to be done, though.

According to AmeriCorps, 46

percent of members embark on careers in education, social work, public safety, government and military service. A way to modernize the volunteer organization is to create strong mentorship opportunities for volunteers to interact with high-level managers, executives and elected officials who can help them envision and shape careers in those fields.

But to fully mature AmeriCorps we need to create tangible career tracks that lead to lasting professions in service, civic entrepreneurship, and elected office. Obama is a perfect example of how community-level experience can form a solid foundation for a life in service and leadership.

We should provide the same opportunity to others.

— Juleyka Lantigua is a writer for *Progressive Media Project*.

