



STEVE LOPEZ:

## The time is right to invest in public service programs

Steve Lopez

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"I never felt like this before. Ever!" 23-year-old Myra Esparza of Pacoima was telling me, explaining the excitement she and other young people feel about President-elect Barack Obama and his call to public service. "People will definitely stand up."

Will they?

And if so, can Obama act quickly enough to take advantage of the momentum and deliver on his pledge to recruit millions of volunteers and increase the ranks of AmeriCorps from 75,000 to 250,000?

Hard to say. But after talking to national leaders in the service field and to Atty. Gen. Jerry Brown, who initiated the California Conservation Corps 32 years ago and could well be governor again in 2010, I'm convinced we're sitting on a rare opportunity.

Civic engagement can't solve all our problems, which expand with each ripple from the global financial collapse. But if you take the spirit of Myra Esparza and magnify it a million times, you'll have a sense of what's possible now that service is suddenly cool.

Esparza, despite a strong distaste for the two-party system, got swept up in Obama-mania and campaigned for him, sending donations of \$5 and \$10 when she was able. Now the Pacoima native and recent college grad is a coordinator at a nonprofit called Youth Speak! Collective in Pacoima, where she helps keep teens on track in school and ushers them into community service.

"Some have worked at Olive View Medical Center running supplies from one hospital division to another," Esparza said. "Some are at elementary schools assisting teachers, some are in after-school programs doing recreation activities and tutoring elementary kids."

## Los Angeles Times

This coming Saturday, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is scheduled to help Youth Speak! Collective kids and volunteers develop a community garden as part of the Mayor's Day of Service program.

Former U.S. Sen. Harris Wofford, a special assistant to President Kennedy who helped create the Peace Corps and later was chief of AmeriCorps, is an Obama advisor. He helped draft the platform calling for doubling the Peace Corps' ranks and increasing AmeriCorps' focus on education, disaster relief, healthcare access for low-income children and environmental defense.

"Obama has said that given the tight budgets, even before the fiscal crisis, the case for this new investment in AmeriCorps has to be that it will solve some major problems," Wofford said.

Wofford noted that we live in recessionary times with staggering high school dropout rates, growing unemployment and violence crippling many neighborhoods, all of it reminiscent of a crisis facing Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

"Roosevelt had a report on his desk saying that 500,000 young men were festering on the streets, out of work and out of school, and he said, 'I want those boys in the woods.' "

And so began the Civilian Conservation Corps, which kept service strong and unemployment low during the Great Depression and in the years before World War II.

It's time, once more, to go into the woods.

"In addition to rebuilding the infrastructure of roads and bridges, we've got to rebuild the infrastructure for a civil society," said David Eisner, the outgoing chief of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees AmeriCorps, SeniorCorps and other service agencies.

Eisner said that with anticipated cuts in many government services and philanthropic contributions to nonprofits, it's all the more important to heed Obama's call to expand the service corps for people of all ages and to encourage more volunteerism as well.

He recommended checking out [www.volunteer.gov](http://www.volunteer.gov). If you type in your ZIP Code and the type of service you're interested in, you'll get a list of all the agencies looking for help in your area.

In Sacramento, California Conservation Corps Director David Muraki is thrilled and terrified these days. Obama's pitch holds great promise, but Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's call for 10% cuts from every state department is real and immediate.

Muraki said the CCC has already suffered deep cuts under Schwarzenegger and Gray Davis, and now serves just 1,300 youths.

They do trail, creek and park maintenance, and fish and wildlife restoration, among other things.

After one year of service at minimum wage, they get a \$2,000 college scholarship and the possibility of a \$4,725 AmeriCorps grant.

If AmeriCorps grows to 250,000, Muraki said, the California Conservation Corps will probably take on many of those new members under contract.

"There's huge potential," he said, if California does what it ought to do with the infusion:

Become the capital of the clean energy industry, using service agencies to recruit and train kids beginning in middle school and high school.

They could later be directed to community college vocational training programs or earn degrees in four-year-schools, and be linked along the way with clean energy employers who might later hire them.

"It's a huge cost," Brown said of the cost of expanding the service corps. But what's the cost of losing kids to gangs, he asked, and the cost of astronomical dropout rates?

"The way great presidents come to greatness is in response to challenges," Brown said, "and Obama's got as big a challenge as the country has faced since the 1930s."

Meanwhile, Brown said of the federal government, "They're throwing money around like there's no tomorrow."

He was referring to hundreds of billions in bailouts for bungling bankers, insurance executives and other Wall Street barons, with the failed leaders of the auto industry now bellying up behind them at the public trough.

If there's money for them, then why not for our youth, now that they're lined up and ready to march?