...a new generation of service

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Action in Congress Poses New Challenges & Opportunities for Youth Service

by Michael MacCrystall

It’s no surprise that California’s youth service and national service programs are carefully watching Congress retool America’s spending priorities. Efforts to reduce the federal deficit, to move social welfare program oversight to the states, and to reduce the number of initiatives funded by federal taxpayer dollars are likely to make “earmarked” national service dollars harder than ever to find. But do these new political realities necessarily mean the end of public (financial) support of youth service?

It wasn’t so long ago that Serve-America grants, National Demonstration Projects, and eventually grants from the Corporation for National Service signaled a new and significant public investment in youth service. With bipartisan support, these federal initiatives brought new dollars and accountability structures to a variety of models of youth service. However, recent shifts in Congress, coupled with voter demands for a more frugal federal government, obviously poses a certain threat to this infrastructure. Inevitably, the youth service field faces some hard questions about how it’s going to stay afloat without the earmarked funds that have come on-line during the first part of the decade.

Proposals for state-level block grants to replace direct federal involvement in social welfare services lie at the heart of reform-minded lawmakers in Washington who believe local expertise is stifled by “big government” intervention. Such thinking carries important implications for California’s public institutions, social service agencies, as well as youth service programs, as these expenditures account for somewhere between $10 and $15 billion annually in the Golden State alone. In coming years, state and local government agencies are likely to receive smaller, but more flexible federal grants for programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Food Stamps, and a variety of education and job training programs. Some other more extreme proposals have actually called for wholesale elimination of many government social service agencies altogether, favoring direct grants for private charities to deliver social services. If anything is certain in this volatile mix of options, it is that state and local governments, under pressure to deliver more for less, will be on the lookout for the most efficient and effective means to meet public needs. In this context, the youth service field must ask itself how it plans to fit into the picture.

Innovative policy and program linkages between private youth service organizations and public agencies offer a hopeful glimpse of the future for youth service in our state and around the country, and may help answer how youth service can make the most of the changing funding structures for social service programs. Some AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve programs, building partnerships with law enforcement and health related agencies, are demonstrating that properly recruited and trained corps members can cost-effectively address public safety and health needs for cities and counties throughout the state.

Meet new Youth Service California Executive Director, Rachel Doherty (l.); Former Director, Megan Swezey Fogarty (r.) will return to Youth Service California as a consultant when she returns from maternity leave.

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