

# Washington Square Citizens League

Discussion Forum 7:00-8:15 pm  
Monday, May 18, 2026

## National Service: Pro or Con

Barbara Gold, Moderator

Should we require every American to give a period of national service upon turning 18? (It might be helpful to stop and recall what you were like at age 18.) What would be the benefits for the individual and for our society? The drawbacks?

- First, it is important to define exactly what we mean. Voluntary or mandatory? Military or not?
- Second, we need to think about how long the term of service should be. Men only? Or women also? Paid or unpaid?
- Third, we need to discuss what the goals of such a program are and how they might be achieved. For example, should a country do it as a jobs program? As a military need? As a way to promote meeting people from different backgrounds? As a year to help young people “find themselves”?
- What would be the logistics in terms of supervision and counseling?
- How would the 18-year-old you have viewed national service?

These are some of the issues that we will be discussing and there are some thoughts about them in the handouts.

I will start with a brief discussion of what other countries are doing and a history of what the United States has done in the past.

### ***One Year of Mandatory National Service For Every American?***

**Lauren Katzenberg, NYT, June 21, 2019.**

Seventy-three years ago, The Times reported that the United States Army demobilized its seven millionth soldier after the end of World War II. When I unearthed this clip several months ago, I thought I was misreading the number. It’s hard to imagine a single service ballooning to more than eight million people (the Army’s peak strength by V-E Day in 1945) and then releasing 6.5 million soldiers in just over a year. The draft certainly made it easier to fill the ranks, but nearly 40 percent of World War II-era service members across all branches volunteered for duty. By comparison, in today’s all-volunteer force approximately 475,000 service members make up the active-duty Army — a fraction of the overall adult population in the United States.

Last year, the Army struggled to meet its end-strength goal of 483,500, even after spending an extra \$200 million on bonuses and lowering standards to let in more recruits. Reporting for The Times in September 2018, [Dave Philipps wrote](#): “On top of having to compete with a robust economy, with an unemployment rate below 4 percent, the Army must pick from what it says is a shrinking pool of eligible recruits. More than two-thirds of young adults do not qualify for military service because of poor physical fitness or other issues such as drug use, according to the Army.”

As the military tests new approaches to pulling in more recruits, a controversial proposal has come out of early discussions with one of the Democratic presidential candidates: one year of mandatory national service for every American. Pete Buttigieg, a Navy veteran and the mayor of South Bend, Ind., mentioned the idea in April during an interview with MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow as a program to improve social cohesion in the United States. “One thing we could do that would change that would be to make it, if not legally obligatory but certainly a social norm, that anybody after they’re 18 spends a year in national service,” Buttigieg said. (He did not indicate whether this would be military service or expand to programs like AmeriCorps.)

It’s not the first time a form of required national service has been suggested as a way to unite the country. For instance, Gen. Stanley McChrystal proposed the idea in 2014 “to create a new rite of passage into adulthood and forge a renewed sense of citizenship.” The plan didn’t go anywhere, but the introduction of such a concept has prompted debates about whether mandatory national service is undemocratic or whether it’s the path toward a stronger sense of solidarity among Americans. I’ll be curious to see if Buttigieg’s remark becomes a campaign talking point going into the 2020 election.

## ***Binding Us Together: More Thoughts on Required National Service***

**By Michael Baker, M.D., Rear Admiral USN (ret), UC Berkley, OLLI, Tuesday, Sep. 13, 2022**

I was required at age 18 to register for the military draft. For people pursuing higher education like me, this commitment to national service could be deferred. Some of us decided to serve even though it was not required. I was one of those, who after some foreign travel following college returned so grateful to have grown up and been educated in the USA.

After some active duty time with the U.S. Public Health Service, and following medical school and surgery training, I joined the U.S. Navy. I had read they needed surgeons, and I wanted to give back. It was the most amazing decision I ever made, and I stayed a lot longer than my required time. A total of 30 years in uniformed service to my country in fact.

I met individuals of various backgrounds including new immigrants, and kids from broken homes and backgrounds of abuse. These “shipmates” became people upon whom I depended, and who depended upon me – especially when we deployed on various overseas missions including combat duty with the Marine Corps. The lessons I learned in uniform have shaped my attitudes and performance in a most positive way. I would not

give back the lessons learned for the income I had to forego or events missed when deployed.

I have participated in a formal group called the [All Volunteer Forum](#) (AVF). This panel of experience experts and academics in AVF reported out to Congress several years ago. What I have gleaned from this participation and other studies is that we indeed do need some form of National Service. Required service if possible. National service in the United States has a long tradition, extending to the founding of the country.

National Service should include both men and women signing up at age 18. Some length of service should be specified. But not just in military uniform. There are many ways to serve. National service can take multiple forms including community service, military service, and other forms. Examples abound of programs that need to be ramped up.

AmeriCorps provides volunteers opportunities in non-profit organizations including JumpStart, Habitat for Humanity, and Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. Other options need to be fostered that include FEMA Corps, National Infrastructure Apprenticeship, Peace Corps, or Climate Corps.

These programs need to be incentivized. They should include student loan forgiveness in exchange for service in needy areas and communities, tuition assistance, and of course provide a stipend and benefits while working. Better than just wiping loans off the books.

France was the first modern nation state to introduce universal military conscription as a condition of citizenship in 1789. Conscription in France continued in various forms for the next two centuries, until being phased out from 1997 to 2001. In 2019, President Emmanuel Macron introduced Service National Universel (SNU), a national service currently on a voluntary basis, for a period of 4 weeks. It will become a compulsory service in the future and be of longer duration. Conscripts will spend two weeks in training and two weeks performing community service. The aim of this civil conscription service is to convey French values, to strengthen social cohesion and to promote social engagement. In 2026, the SNU is expected to become mandatory for all young citizens. The completion of the SNU is expected to become the prerequisite for getting the French Baccalauréat - the university-entrance diploma, and also the driving license examination.

Wow. Pretty big step for France. We in the USA need this as well. Pete Buttigieg, Elizabeth Warren, and Kristen Gillebrand have all promoted ramping up National Service. This would introduce young people to those of other backgrounds and experiences and help heal the deep divisions in our nation. We are a “can do” people with a history of national service, and required service for our youth provides a common opportunity, broader cultural exposure and future expectation for young Americans that would bind us together.

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# *Every American Should Serve For One Year*

by [Stanley McChrystal](#) Time, JUN 20, 2017

**America needs a restart.** It has long devoted its energies to solving its many big problems — unequal opportunity, crumbling infrastructure, lagging education, inadequate training in a changing economy and threats to peace around the world. But it has done so with tired methods. Simply doing more or less of what we have done in the past will not fix what the United States faces. Every solution requires more than another budget negotiation or Facebook post. Each also requires trust and consensus — the hard and disappearing work of democracy.

Our civic landscape today is quite disturbing. Trust in one another and in key institutions are at [historic lows](#). Our politics have become nastier; it's harder to get anything done. Meanwhile, most of the other indicators of our civic connectedness — [volunteering, voting, joining voluntary and civic associations](#) — are significantly down from previous years.

This is not the America we can be. We are a nation of innovators and problem-solvers who sparked revolutions in democratic government, civil rights, communications, flight, rural electrification and technology. We are a country defined by ideals now in need of rescue.

**America needs a big idea that plays to its strength. It should look to national service.**

We should get to the business of providing at least one million opportunities each year for young Americans to spend a service year with peers who are different from them — by race, ethnicity, income, politics and religious belief. At this scale of one full quarter of an age cohort, serving together to solve public problems will build attachment to community and country, understanding among people who might otherwise be skeptical of one another and a new generation of leaders who can get things done. I saw these effects for 34 years in the U.S. Army. We need them in civilian life.

Building from the outstanding infrastructure of AmeriCorps, YouthBuild, Peace Corps and other programs, Service Year Alliance [analysis](#) shows we could unleash the energy of our young people to tutor and mentor students in low-performing schools; support the elderly so they age with dignity; help communities respond to disasters; assist veterans reintegrating into their hometowns; and perform a thousand different tasks of value to our country. The Serve America Act — passed by Congress nearly a decade ago — already contemplates that we ramp up these opportunities from about 75,000 AmeriCorps positions today to 250,000, getting us one-quarter of the way toward our goal. Congress needs to follow through on its bipartisan commitment and fund these positions.

**National service has already proven its value.**

In coal country in Kentucky, fifty Volunteers in Service to America helped put unemployed coal miners [back to work](#) in computer coding and telework jobs and connected more than 25,000 unemployed workers to job training and placement services. We should bring this effective approach to scale across rural America and the rust belt.

In Detroit, 150 national service members in an Urban Safety Corps are [reducing crime](#) and increasing public safety by engaging residents in boarding up vacant homes, expanding neighborhood watch groups, ensuring students get to school safely, and conducting home safety audits to protect residents from violence. Crime has declined in these neighborhoods and saved taxpayers millions of dollars. There is no reason to believe this couldn't be replicated elsewhere.

States like [Iowa](#) and [Virginia](#) are using existing resources across agencies to create new corps to address public problems to boost literacy and alleviate child hunger and are hiring national service members across state government because they have built skills in leadership, problem-solving, and working in teams. All states could do this and meet public needs at lower cost.

Sargent Shriver [wanted](#) to run the Peace Corps through colleges, but the infrastructure did not exist when he founded the agency in 1961. It does now. Many colleges, including William and Mary, Tufts, Miami-Dade College, Tulane and Averett, are creating service year opportunities for their students at home and abroad, while connecting service to courses of study, offering course credit and embedding a serious commitment to national service in their policies of admission and graduation. More of America's colleges could make a similar commitment.

Congress can do three powerful things to help. First, it should honor its commitment to provide 250,000 national service opportunities each year through the [Serve America Act](#). Second, it could amend the National Defense Reauthorization Act to have civilian service meet the needs of military families and veterans, and to enable veterans to perform civilian service to help transition back to civilian life. And third, Congress should pass Senator John McCain's bill to create a [21st Century Civilian Conservation Service Corps](#), which he introduced in 2015, to engage young Americans and veterans in restoring national parks and other public lands.

Through a serious commitment to bridging our differences and restoring our confidence in solving big challenges together, America can reignite the energy needed to make our country what it can be.

## ***MANPOWER***

Michael A. Bailin and Marc Pt. Freedman, *Book Reviews*

*National Service: What Would It Mean?* by Richard Danzig and Peter Szanton. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986, 306pp. Price: \$30.00

The words "national service" conjure up the vision of an army of American youth, dedicating a year of their lives to addressing the nation's greatest unmet needs—helping the elderly, tutoring young children, protecting the wilderness, and at the same time getting, in the words of William James, "the childishness knocked out of them . . . to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas." That visionary army would solve America's social, environmental and employment problems and, simultaneously, reduce the alienation of its youth.

It is this ideal of national service, embodied in James' 1910 essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War," that likely inspired 65 percent of the respondents to a Gallup poll in 1984 to favor a year of national service for all young Americans in return for educational benefits. That year and again in 1985, a bill to establish an American Conservation Corps, patterned after FDR's Civilian Conservation Corps, generated enthusiastic support from conservatives and liberals and passed both houses of Congress overwhelmingly before being vetoed by President Reagan. It is clear, however, that James, the public, and Congress, at least, were considering an ideal. The ideal remains to be translated into operational elements--and each one of those elements is controversial.

With the youth cohort expected to decline sharply through 1992, it is certainly time to begin to examine what national service might actually look like in practice. Should an All-Volunteer Force be insufficient to sustain the necessary military manpower, national service would likely be proposed as one vehicle for mitigating the inequities of the draft.

In *National Service: What Would It Mean?*, Richard Danzig and Peter Szanton have made an enormous contribution to future exploration. The comprehensiveness and rigor of their study has taken national service out of the realm of the ideal, where its vagueness serves only to maintain a broad political constituency, and made it a concrete subject for careful analysis.

After examining the societal, personal, and military aspects of national service, Danzig and Szanton force us to look hard at its implications. Their device for doing so is the presentation of four plausible models for national service, designed to bring into sharp relief the key constitutional, political, social, economic and logistic issues surrounding the concept. Briefly, these models are:

- **School-Based Service:** 240 hours of service during the school year or the summer would be a prerequisite for high school graduation.
- **Draft-Based Service:** A military draft for 18-year-olds would require two years of service in the armed forces or a civilian alternative.
- **Voluntary Service:** The current range of such volunteer programs as Peace Corps, VISTA, and state and local youth service and conservation corps would be expanded to include 180,000 individuals in volunteer efforts.
- **Universal Service:** One year of military or civilian service would be mandatory for all United States citizens. The year might be served at any age, though individuals would be assessed a 5 percent federal income surtax each year until service was rendered.

The authors describe these models in detail, skillfully weighing their social, personal, and economic benefits and costs. They examine the variations to shed light on some basic considerations: should service be mandatory or voluntary; should it include just men of draft age, or everyone of all ages; which services could be performed by whom; should the main benefits accrue to the servers or those served; should national service be designed for the disadvantaged or for everyone; to what extent should it be centrally or locally

planned or managed; what would be the effects of each model on public services, the military, the labor market and participants; what would be the public costs and consequences of each?

Having defined the issues--with a richness and specificity unusual in such analyses--the authors draw conclusions that address the most common contentions of proponents and critics of national service. Danzig and Szanton find all four of their models of national service to be constitutionally permissible, politically plausible, and capable of performing many tasks that now go undone. But they also conclude that service is likely to meet the needs of only some youth, only partially and at high cost; that it is a poor solution to reducing youth unemployment; that it would provide little in the way of benefits to the military; and that implementation would be difficult and at a cost not offset by the value of the work done.

For advocates of national service, the weight of their findings is discouraging. However, among these conclusions is an important qualification. Danzig and Szanton acknowledge that some of national service's most important potential benefits defy economic analysis. Persistent questions remain to be resolved. Would national service provide a sense of citizenship earned rather than simply received, producing individuals who value the country more highly? What would be the effect of opening up to citizen participation and scrutiny the large bureaucratic institutions now obscured from public view? Would national service create a pool of human resources that could enlarge such services as day care, conservation or assistance to the aged? Would it stimulate voluntarism generally? It is precisely around these more elusive issues, which Danzig and Szanton frame but cannot resolve, that national service's vast and tantalizing potential resides.

Despite the unavailability of this knowledge, national service should not be removed from consideration as public policy for two quite different reasons. First and pragmatically, whatever its impact on the nation's social and environmental needs and on the needs of American youth, national service may very well become policy simply because it could help make a military draft politically possible. Second--and speculatively--there remains that close correspondence between national service's elusive areas of promise and many of this society's most serious, and thus far intractable, problems. For these divergent but equally compelling reasons, we would do well to heed Danzig and Szanton's call for continued, careful examination of the elements of national service.

## ***National Service Is a Terrible Idea***

John Delaney's plan amounts to forced labor.

By [Conor Friedersdorf](#), The Atlantic, JULY 30, 2019

The Democratic presidential candidate John Delaney proposed this week that the government partner with private companies and unions to create a national program of forced labor. He calls it "[John Delaney's Plan for National Service](#)." "Every American will

complete a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 2 years of mandatory national service when they graduate high school, or turn 18,” it states.

“No exceptions,” a press release [clarifies](#). (Tough luck, pregnant 18-year-olds.)

With the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, the Constitution guaranteed that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude ... shall exist within the United States.” Delaney obviously doesn’t see it this way, but mandatory national service is plainly involuntary servitude.

Nevertheless, the former congressman is arguing for it.

“It’s time to bring the country together, restore our sense of shared purpose and a common and inclusive national destiny,” Delaney said. “By mandating national service, we build a future where young people begin their adult lives serving their country and working alongside people from different backgrounds. Where people from Massachusetts and Florida and Oklahoma work alongside each other; where people who grew up in the suburbs, in farm towns, in coal country, in urban communities get to know each other, get to learn from each other, and get to see firsthand that we still have a lot in common.”

I sympathize with the impulse to expose Americans from different backgrounds to one another in the hopes that it will lead to better cooperation. I’d support all sorts of voluntary initiatives with that purpose in mind. But I am repulsed by the notion that every American can or ought to be united around a single “purpose” or agree on the country’s “destiny,” which even John Adams and Thomas Jefferson could not do. And forced labor transgresses against natural rights to liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

How strange that any Democrat fails to see associated perils at this moment. If mandatory national service were in place today, it would be run by Donald Trump. How would the Trump administration marshal the nation’s youths if it were able to compel the labor of each young man and woman, “no exceptions”?

Perhaps the White House political adviser Stephen Miller would help decide where to assign them and how best to advance the “national destiny” as he sees it. Perhaps some would be assigned to help patrol the border.

Or say that Delaney wins the presidency. Would national unity be advanced by drafting every 18-year-old with a MAGA hat into national service under the new, Democratic administration? Perhaps we would have a culture-war fight about whether volunteering at Planned Parenthood should count toward discharging one’s obligation. In any case, as Scott Shackford [writes](#) at *Reason*, “Forcing an entire younger generation to do an older generation’s bidding will not bring a ‘sense of shared purpose’ any more than drafting them to fight in Vietnam did.”

Even setting aside the costs to 18-year-olds, the assumption that this workforce would better serve the nation than the status quo is unwarranted at best.

Individuals are simply better equipped than the federal government to assess where they can best contribute to society, given their interests and aptitudes—would you have wanted LeBron James, Serena Williams, or Natalie Portman to spend their respective 19th years

installing solar panels in the Mojave Desert? I don't want the next generation of much-needed primary-care doctors to delay the day when they'll see patients and practice for one fewer year of life.

And even if central planners could know where to place each 18-year-old to best advance the national interest, the politicians, bureaucrats, private companies, unions, and more would all try to bend the process to their own advantage.

Meanwhile, important projects would suffer from an influx of unskilled labor.

"To implement infrastructure apprenticeships," Delaney's plan states, "all federal contractors would be required to design and implement an apprentice program."

I can see it now: the bridge in need of repairs to guarantee its safety; the snarled traffic every day that it's closed; and the federal contractor fixing it even less efficiently than before because, by government mandate, it's running something like an untaped *The Real World: Seismic Retrofit*. "Foreman, sorry to bother you as a steel delivery is coming in, but Mason and Isabella broke up again, Chaden is dangerously hungover, Alejandra wants to know if we can move the crane so there's no shadow in her TikTok video, and Liam's mom is on the phone again to make sure you told everyone about his peanut allergy."

There's nothing wrong with an apprenticeship program for young people. But an apprenticeship for 18-year-olds who don't want to be there is a recipe for dysfunction.

So long as millions of Americans regard mandatory national service as immoral, unconstitutional, or economically illiterate, imposing it anyway, even with majority support, would do far more to divide the country than to unify it.

At the very least, there would be lawsuits, public denunciations of creeping tyranny, protests, and calls for civil disobedience to thwart its implementation as antiauthoritarians revolted against coercive claims on the lives of young adults.

As the legal scholar Ilya Somin once put it, "Mandatory national service is not just another policy proposal. It is an idea that undermines one of the fundamental principles of a free society: that people own themselves and their labor. We are not the property of the government, a majority of the population, or some employer. Mandatory national service is a frontal attack on that principle."

A free people should fight it accordingly.

## ***The Case for Mandatory National Service***

By [Jay Caspian Kang](#), Opinion Writer, NYT, Aug. 4, 2022

A few weeks ago, I debuted a running feature called "The Magic Wand," where I throw out an idea and make the case for it in this newsletter. This week, I want to suggest a solution to the civic worker problem that would bring in a fleet of new employees into some of the more unskilled, less in demand, but ultimately invaluable positions that are indispensable to functioning communities.

## The Problem

Last month, The Times [published a story](#) about the severe understaffing of New York City's municipal services. "The wave of departures has included health care workers, parks employees, police officers and child protective service workers," my colleagues Dana Rubinstein and Emma G. Fitzsimmons reported. Nearly 8 percent of city jobs are currently vacant, a rate five times that of recent years. It's difficult to pinpoint a specific cause for this situation — The Times's story cited slow hiring processes, better opportunities in other fields, and the hangover from a pandemic hiring freeze that ended in November 2021.

New York City is certainly not the only city facing a civic employee shortage. In San Francisco, municipal staffing problems have gotten so bad that workers have [taken to the streets](#) demanding that the city fill vacant positions. The city of San Diego, as of this spring, had an eye-popping [16 percent job vacancy rate](#) for its various agencies and services. Washington D.C., which is facing a police shortage, started offering a [\\$20,000 hiring bonus](#) to new officers who join the force.

The effects of all these civic worker shortages can be felt in nearly every facet of life. Trash doesn't get picked up; the police take longer to respond to calls; services that help the homeless suffer from chronic [understaffing and infrastructural failure](#).

## The Solution: A Major Expansion of AmeriCorps

In late March 2022, the White House proposed a more than 16 percent increase to the budget of AmeriCorps, a federal service program that gives people a modest stipend to work on various projects across the country. If approved, the agency would receive a total of \$1.34 billion, [which will go to supporting](#) "250,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers" and "support targeted investments in communities where the need is greatest."

Instead of just adding 16 percent to the budget of AmeriCorps, the White House should increase the size of the AmeriCorps work force from 250,000 to three million (for the rest of this column, I'll refer to it as Mega AmeriCorps), embark on a substantial press tour to promote it, and broadly expand the benefits of enrolling in the program. This would be the first step in eventually calling for a revival of the Universal National Service Act, which would require every American to commit two years of their lives to national service between the years of 18 and 25.

This idea might sound scary at first blush, but was actually part of the Democratic mainstream as recently as 14 years ago when [Barack Obama seriously discussed a similar idea](#) during his 2008 campaign. Charles Rangel, the former longtime Democratic congressman from New York, repeatedly [called for forms of compulsory service](#) for years. More recently, Pete Buttigieg floated the idea while campaigning in [2019](#). Last year, my colleagues [on the editorial board](#) asked if young Americans should be required to do a year of service.

The issue, as the editorial board pointed out, is that it's difficult, potentially illegal, and perhaps even morally wrong to compel young Americans into a period of service. That said,

it's also difficult to imagine that these programs could become voluntary societal norms without a radical shift in the sense of precarity and pressure that young people feel on a daily basis.

What's needed is a real test run for universal national service; one that's championed by the government and not just an assortment of nonprofits like, say, Teach for America. Mega AmeriCorps could be just that. A new fleet of workers, mostly between the ages of 18 and 25, could be placed in cities, towns, and rural areas with civic labor shortages. They should be provided housing, a livable salary, and a job training infrastructure that will not only prepare them to do their work, but also set them up for a career in whatever civic organization they enter.

The key for success would be a slow, but ultimately forceful normalization of joining up with Mega AmeriCorps after high school, which would have the added effect of lessening the pressure that many kids feel to compete and excel in their academic pursuits. Access to higher education plays far too large a role in nearly every facet of American life, from what salary you earn to [what side of the political divide you fall](#). This would be a conscious effort to reduce the importance of a postsecondary education by creating a bridge between high school and a career that could allow you to circumvent the need to go to college at all. Much of the money that goes to Mega AmeriCorps would be spent on training and apprenticeship programs to get young people credentialed and prepared for a career.

Even middle-class kids who might ultimately find their way to a four-year college could be encouraged to join up with AmeriCorps with the proper incentives. For what feels like years, the White House has been debating student loan forgiveness. While I'm not entirely sure about tying existing loan forgiveness to Mega AmeriCorps, I do think the White House could partner with states and, much like the G.I. Bill, offer to supplement or fully cover the state or community college tuition of anyone who had completed two years of service. The service time would also count as class credits and could even help with admission into more exclusive state schools. This would also reduce tuition costs by cutting down on the time a Mega AmeriCorps graduate needed to be on campus.

### **Here's a specific example of how it could work**

I've written [quite a bit](#) about how one of the enduring and less-discussed problems with homelessness in California is that there simply are not enough workers to carry out the grand plans of politicians or even maintain the current raft of services. This is understandable even in times when civic agencies are fully staffed, for the very simple reason that working with the homeless isn't easy.

Currently, much of the homelessness work in California gets contracted out to third-party nonprofits like [Urban Alchemy](#), an organization that helps formerly incarcerated people find work. But the intensity of the homelessness crisis and the labor shortage have placed a great deal of strain on these organizations [to keep up with demand](#).

An energized and well-funded Mega AmeriCorps could produce a new work force to engage with the homeless at every level: Outreach on the streets, support to get people into shelters or into permanent housing, and then follow-ups once people have stabilized.

Because it's a federal program, it would be easier for the public to monitor than third-party nonprofits. And while it might be true that many of the young people who go into these jobs will not work in homelessness services for their whole career, there will at least be enough bodies around to run everything from shelters to permanent supportive housing services to harm reduction centers to so-called "Safe Sleep" sites.

### **An admittedly too-broad and unpopular opinion**

I, myself, am an AmeriCorps alumnus. I did an environmental restoration program in Seattle when I was 19 years old. I was not an ideal employee by any means, but I did plant some trees and learn quite a bit about forestry, climate change and park maintenance. I also learned that there is a value to service, which was an invaluable lesson during a dark time in my life when the thought of going to college and pursuing some sort of career seemed like an impossibility.

Some of these revelations came from just growing up a bit, but I do think that there was something about the almost conscripted feel of the organization that provided me with a sense of duty to the city of Seattle and the Pacific Northwest. I joined AmeriCorps as a teenager because I did not have any other plans with my life, nor did I have any skills. It was, in effect, the only place that would take me and give me something to do.

Today's young people are dealing with much more than I did back around the turn of the millennium. Many feel [hopeless and depressed](#). National service is not a panacea for these ailments, nor can it change the [economic precarity that many young people feel](#), but it can provide a sense of community and a meaningful pathway into a career that falls outside of the clogged and ultracompetitive pathways that exist today.

I do not support compulsory military service, but it seems clear to me that many of the problems with political polarization and the atomization of the individual in this country come from the fact that there are increasingly few places where people from different economic backgrounds can work together for a good cause.

Among the elite classes, the idea of service has mostly been reduced down to a line item on a college application. The much-discussed divides in this country, whether economic, racial or [educational](#), cannot be solved through some feat of wonkery or through pretty speeches by politicians. What needs to exist is some place that can pool a lot of different young people together. College will never accomplish any of that in the way that two years of service — hopefully eventually two mandatory years of service — could.

The good news is that AmeriCorps already exists. It's time to turn it into something much more ambitious and hopefully let its example pave the way for a national service requirement.