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Basu: Chopping community service programs is ill-advised

Jordan Jones, 26, was a self-described “rudderless youth” after graduating from the University of Iowa in 2008, bright and eager to do something socially useful but unable to do it for free, because there was rent to pay and food to buy.

He didn’t need a lot — he could live cheaply sharing a house — but he wanted meaningful work rather than a job dishing out burgers.

Jones’ explorations led him to AmeriCorps, the national service program founded in 1993 by former President Bill Clinton. AmeriCorps programs — there are three different ones — all, in different ways, enable people to serve their communities for a period in exchange for a small stipend and help repaying college loans.

Through AmeriCorps’ state and national program, Jones worked for Habitat for Humanity for two years as a construction assistant, building houses and training volunteers, and being paid \$900 a month. During that time, he co-authored with his boss a report on problems with older mobile homes in Johnson County and the lack of adequate oversight and inspections, which was quoted in The Des Moines Register.

The job led Jones to get hired this year by Serve Next, an advocacy organization that lobbies for national service programs like AmeriCorps. Now he’s trying to save from elimination the service program that got him hired.

The Republican-dominated U.S. House of Representatives has introduced legislation to defund all but one component of the approximately \$1 billion that goes to the Corporation for National and Community Service budget. AmeriCorps would go; only a program for older Americans, Senior Corps, would still get funding.

Jones says these programs bring at least a 2-to-1 return on the federal money invested because of matching funds from nonprofit organizations.

National service sounds so patently obvious that it’s hard to imagine anyone opposing it. It’s been supported by both parties. Former President George H.W. Bush’s Thousand Points of Light Foundation was a precursor to Clinton’s AmeriCorps, under which it was absorbed.

And when it’s offered through a public-private partnership it is, to use a hackneyed cliché, “win/win.” It meets community needs, provides skills-

enhancing employment and teaches the value of service.

Under the AmeriCorps state and national programs, money goes to local and national organizations to employ AmeriCorps workers in our communities in education, public safety, health, housing and disaster relief.

Besides getting a small living allowance and benefits, after a year of full-time work, these AmeriCorps workers are given an education award up to \$5,350 to pay for college or graduate school or to repay student loans. Those jobs are also open to older workers, who can choose to give their education awards to relatives.

Not surprisingly, the Corporation for National and Community Service received 500,000 applicants nationally last year for 80,000 slots.

Most AmeriCorps members are 18 to 25 years old. If you recently graduated from college, or have a kid who did, you know what a tough job market it is out there. And desirable positions require work experience. This is the perfect “gap year” way to get that experience or to help prepare for graduate school. Jones says the experience at Habitat helped one of his co-workers get into architecture school.

Melissa Simmermaker, a 2008 Simpson College graduate and now president of the Des Moines AmeriCorps alumni chapter, did her year of service through AmeriCorps VISTA — one of the other two AmeriCorps programs — at the Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service, and later got hired there. The commission, whose members are appointed by the governor, is the Iowa agency that federal funding goes through for service programs.

The Corporation for National and Community Service allocated more than \$18 million for service programs in Iowa this fiscal year. The amounts are based on population size.

Right now, 19,000 people are employed in such programs in the state, serving in more than 790 nonprofits, schools, and faith-based organizations.

“This generation is so committed to service,” says Emily Shields, who graduated from college 10 years ago and is now executive director of Iowa Campus Compact, a nonprofit working with colleges and universities to institute local civic engagement projects for their students.

Through the Iowa Campus Compact AmeriCorps VISTA Project, students at colleges serve 300 to 450 hours in an academic year for college credits and get more than \$1,000 in tuition or loan payment.

Without national and community service programs, Volunteer Iowa says Iowans would lose more than \$5 million a year in higher education funding alone. But that's just one part of what would be lost.

The programs provide valuable staffing to underfunded organizations that serve our communities. They provide young college graduates with work in a particularly tough economy. Maybe most important, they help people appreciate the value of giving back to their communities.

For more on the legislation and efforts to save national service programs, go to saveservice.org. Then, please contact your members of Congress and tell them to leave service learning programs alone.