



Foolish Cuts in Important Service Programs

By David R. Jones

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The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), created and operated since 1966 by the Community Service Society, delivers critical services throughout the five boroughs designed to meet pressing local needs. RSVP volunteers, ranging in age from 55 to 101, provide an invaluable service and save the city and service organizations millions of dollars.

RSVP volunteers assist New Yorkers in gaining basic money management skills, mentor children of incarcerated parents and at-risk youth, reduce the rate of recidivism by assisting the formerly incarcerated in removing barriers to gainful employment, provide literacy services to children and adults – including English as a Second Language - assist at soup kitchens and food pantries providing meals and food packages to the poor, and deliver meals and provide companionship to the homebound, among many other services.

In 2010, over 5,600 RSVP volunteers contributed close to one million hours of service. The program is tremendously cost-effective. The yearly cost in federal funding to field one RSVP volunteer is \$162. While the federal cost per volunteer hour is \$0.93, the value to the community of volunteers' hours, calculated at the minimum wage, exceeds \$7.2 million.

So why would the federal government want to cut funding to RSVP and other, like-minded service organizations? HR 1, the Continuing Resolution for fiscal year 2011 passed by the House of Representatives on February 19, 2011, eliminates \$1.4 billion in federal funds for programs that encourage people to serve in their communities. These include the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and the programs it administers, the Retired & Senior Volunteer Program, the Foster Grandparent Program, and the Senior Companion Program (collectively the "Senior Corps") as well as AmeriCorps, VISTA, Habitat for Humanity, City Year, and Teach for America.

Senior Corps is a very important collection of programs under CNCS slated for elimination under HR 1. Ending CNCS programs would eliminate Senior Corps - resulting in the "firing" of more than 450,000 senior volunteers nationwide.

In an attempt to stamp their right wing ideology on each piece of legislation, conservatives in Congress have abandoned common sense. House members have taken to indiscriminately cutting what they call "wasteful spending," this being defined as any programs to which they are ideologically opposed. These cuts are a prime example of a false economy – eliminating many human service programs to save a pittance in funds.

For example: In 2010, nearly 660 AmeriCorps members assigned to Habitat for Humanity helped recruit and supervise 200,000 community volunteers to build 3,600 homes for low-income families. Eliminating funding for AmeriCorps means Habitat for Humanity will find it difficult to finance projects and recruit

volunteers. The result will be fewer houses built, all for a savings of about \$4 million. Teach for America, losing its grant from AmeriCorps, means it would have to reduce by about 500 the corps of recent college graduates that it trains to help raise achievement in low-income schools. Total savings: \$11 million.

Elimination of RSVP from the federal budget would have an enormous impact on New York City: 144 health-related community organizations would lose the services of 1,840 RSVP volunteers; 134 social services programs would lose the services of 1,442 RSVP volunteers; and 68 community partners providing services for older adults would lose the services of 1,322 RSVP volunteers.

The loss of funds associated with these programs would have a drastic effect on millions of people all over the U.S., including our own communities in New York City. We must convey this message to members of the Senate, who will have the opportunity to reject the folly of these budget cuts.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.