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National Youth Service

Donald J. Eberly

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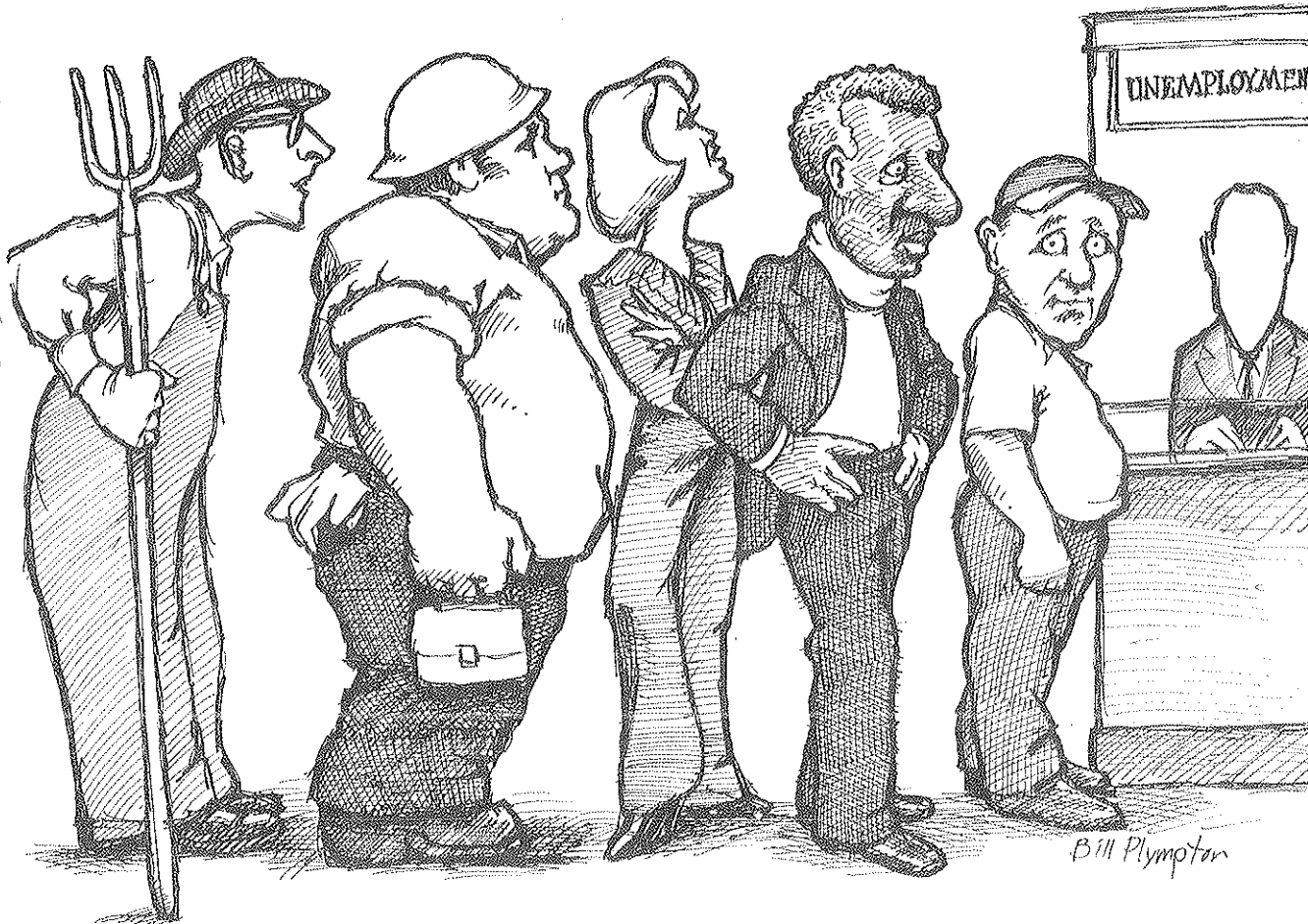
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TODAY'S BIGGEST URBAN PROBLEM: UNEMPLOYMENT

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NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE

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A national youth service program could attack two of the most serious urban problems—the lack of needed services and the excessive levels of unemployment among restless young people.
.....

by
DONALD J. EBERLY

No longer is it necessary to build a case for the severity of the urban crisis. Daycare centers are being closed down. Housing for the poor is in disrepair. Health and education programs are being cut back. Crime is rampant in the ghettos and increasing elsewhere.

The urban crisis—desperate as it is—may contain the seeds of its own solution. On the one hand, the untended parks, dilapidated housing, isolated old people and understaffed hospitals, schools and libraries represent millions of hours of potentially satisfying and useful work. At the same time, thousands of unemployed young people roam the streets of every large city with nothing to do.

A national service program* could be launched in those urban or rural areas which have suffered the greatest deterioration—not only to restore them to their former condition, but to improve them beyond it. Not only can the day-care center be reopened and attain minimal standards, but it can be given the staff to make it an exemplary center. Not only can the leaky roof be repaired, but

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Donald J. Eberly is a senior policy analyst for ACTION. He is also the Executive Director of National Service Secretariat in Washington, D.C., which is maintained to keep alive the idea of national service.
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* Portions of this article were taken from "A Model for Universal Youth Service," a paper presented by the author to a conference sponsored by the Eleanor Roosevelt Institute in April, 1976. The material here is used with the permission of the Institute.
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the apartments below can be stripped of lead paint and given a fresh coat of unleaded paint. Not only can the crime rate be leveled off; it can be reduced.

In 1906, William James described his version of a national youth service, which was to constitute "a moral equivalent to war":

To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets
 in December, to dish-washing, clothes-washing, and window-washing,
 to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stokeholes, and
 to the frames of skyscrapers, would our gilded youths be drafted off,
 according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them
 and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer
 ideas. They would have paid their blood-tax, done their own part in the
 immemorial human warfare against nature; they would tread the earth
 more proudly, the women would value them more highly, they would
 be better fathers and teachers of the following generation.

In the seventy years since James compiled this list, the need for labor-intensive jobs has, of course, shifted from things to people. In a modern national youth service, human service activities in such places as daycare centers, schools, hospitals and nursing homes would be dominant. Some activities would be primarily physical. These include park maintenance and house repair, and in the nation's parks and forests, a revised version of the Civilian Conservation Corps would be instituted to catch up on the work that is many years behind schedule.

Today's national service could guarantee to all young men and women an opportunity to serve their fellow Americans for a full year. Young people would receive service vouchers entitling them to accept positions with public agencies or nonprofit organizations. When the youthful applicant and prospective sponsor reached agreement on their mutual responsibilities, the voucher would be countersigned by a national service official, and the applicant would then enter national service for one year and receive payment underwritten by the federal government.

This brief description of national service raises several questions. Are there enough jobs to be done? Would young people enroll in such a program? Wouldn't this program attract mostly poor young people from the ghetto? Conversely, wouldn't this program enroll mostly idealistic young people from the upper stratum of society? How much would national service participants be paid? Wouldn't they come into conflict with labor unions?

PLS—A Test Program

A national service experiment which could serve as a basis for answering some of these questions was recently conducted in the Seattle area. Beginning in 1973, with a one million dollar grant from ACTION to Washington State, one-page application forms were sent to all eighteen-to-twenty-five year olds

in the area who held motor vehicle licenses. Applications reached at least three-quarters of the target population, while others learned of the program from friends and relatives, youth organizations and media announcements. The program was labeled Program for Local Service (PLS). Despite the publicity, however, a follow-up study found that only about one young person in five was aware of the opportunity to apply.

Approximately 10 percent of the "aware" population did apply for PLS, and while they represented all segments of the eighteen-to-twenty-five age group, they did not comprise an exact profile of the youthful population. Three out of five applicants were women. One out of five was from a minority group whereas only one in seven young people in the Seattle area is from a minority group. Rather surprisingly, PLS applicants were somewhat better educated than the average and also came from families of less than average income. One high school dropout and one college graduate could be found among every seven PLS applicants. The remaining five had completed high school and some of them had attended college. The most common characteristic of PLS applicants was their employment status. Seven out of ten were unemployed and looking for work, a proportion estimated to be at least twice as high as that of eighteen-to-twenty-five year olds in the Seattle area at that time.

How did these proportions shift as some applicants became PLS participants and others did not? They didn't change at all. The profile of PLS participants was not significantly different in any way from the profile of PLS applicants. A major reason for the absence of any shift was the involvement of several dozen people as brokers or "matchmakers" who were on call to assist the applicant and the prospective sponsor in understanding PLS and in working out details of the agreement between the two. Matchmakers were especially useful to younger applicants, those without work experience and those who were mentally retarded or otherwise handicapped.

PLS participants received \$2970 for their year of service, approximately 10 percent below the minimum wage at that time. They performed a wide variety of services: helping an old lady fix a clothesline; caring for a person with an epileptic seizure; giving weekly physical therapy treatments to sixteen people at the Fircrest State School for the Mentally Deficient; involving youthful first offenders in a mini-bike program designed to build a sense of responsibility and self-worth; and serving as advocates for new clients at the United Cerebral Palsy Association.

Overall, the work of the PLS participants was evenly divided between public agencies and nonprofit organizations in the private sector. The field of education claimed 25 percent of the participants while mental health, other health services, crime and protection, and recreation each claimed approximately 10 percent. The remaining 35 percent were engaged in a variety of social services. PLS also served a wide range of clients although special projects tended to emphasize children and youth, low-income and handicapped people, the elderly, criminal offenders and women.

Demand and Supply

The PLS experience tended to confirm the findings of earlier studies which revealed an immediate demand for some 250,000 young people and a long-range need for four to five million. Job requests for PLS participants totaled 1,200, all of which could have been filled immediately. Extrapolated nationwide, this figure would translate into 300,000 immediate openings. Even 300,000 should be considered a conservative estimate because it is based on population reflecting the need for human services only. Potential jobs in the nation's parks and forests were not even taken into account. The National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service have since reported, however, that several hundred thousand workers are needed simply to catch up on conservation projects. Hence there is an immediate demand for at least half a million young people.

Long-range need can be translated into real jobs only over a period of time. Urban schools alone, however, could use up to a million national service participants as tutors. But they cannot be put in place tomorrow. The students and their parents, the teachers and their unions, the administrators and the school boards will have to work out the programs. The national service placement mechanism will be designed to place participants in schools and other organizations as rapidly as participants can usefully be absorbed in a manner that is not threatening to unions or older workers.

How Many Volunteers?

How many young people could be expected to volunteer for a program of national youth service? First, let us examine what it is that they are doing now. Of 29 million Americans from eighteen to twenty-four years of age, about 16 million are working as civilians, one million are in military service, and three million are unemployed and looking for work. Of the remaining nine million not in the labor force, some four million are attending school or college, three million are keeping house, about 400,000 are either institutionalized or unable to work, while many of the others have given up looking for work.

Certainly national youth service (NYS) would prove as attractive to the millions of unemployed young people as it did in the PLS experiment. National service would draw not only from the group officially counted as unemployed. As it became clear that no one was turned away from national service, it would also attract many of those unemployed young people who had given up looking for work.

The next largest group of national service participants probably would come from among the four million young people outside the labor force who are attending school or college. Some may look upon NYS as a way to "find themselves," others may regard it as a means to test a career, and still others as a way to break out of twelve or more years spent in the lock-step system of education.

In recent years, educational institutions appear to have served as con-

venient stopping places for people who really wanted to be elsewhere. In the early seventies when the military draft no longer threatened young men, the enrollment of white males in institutions of higher learning dropped off sharply even as the overall enrollment increased substantially. And in the midst of the fall, 1975 recession when forecasters said enrollment would decline because of the economic squeeze, it actually rose, apparently because student financial aid was available while jobs were not.

While national service would be the preferred choice of some young people now in college and would initially result in lowered enrollments, its long-range impact on higher education almost certainly would be positive. There is reason to think that those going on to college from national service would take with them the clear sense of direction and seriousness of purpose possessed by the World War II veterans who went on to college. And if an educational entitlement is attached to national service, as it should be, many young people who otherwise would not have been able to pursue further schooling might have that opportunity.

The third largest group of NYS participants would probably come from among the 3,000,000 people keeping house. The availability and cost of day care would of course, be important factors in their enrollment.

Some people might leave employment to enter NYS, but presumably their places would be taken by others and the unemployment rolls would decrease as a consequence. The numbers of people enrolling in NYS would fluctuate with economic and social conditions. After a build-up period of about three years, the supply-demand equation suggests an average enrollment of one million young people.

Issues and Answers

Decisions on enrolling in NYS would be influenced by many factors, such as the availability of jobs and the reputation of NYS. Its design, particularly in the early years, would also affect the decision-making process. The most commonly debated issues affecting the design of NYS are discussed below.

Should the program be voluntary or compulsory? Compulsory programs have considerable appeal. They are great equalizers. Everyone must pull his own weight. But there is something incongruent in attempting to force people to exercise compassion. How can it be accomplished without damaging the intended client?

Compulsory national service programs function in authoritarian states such as Cuba or in countries like Israel where problems are so universally perceived that there is no real objection to making a program of national service compulsory and universal. The United States rejects the authoritarian pattern; and if a universally perceived "threat" should appear there would be little need to compel service since a large share of the population would volunteer for it. The critical need is to demonstrate, on a fairly large scale, the utility of a voluntary national service program.

Should NYS participants be paid the prevailing wage, the minimum wage or a subsistence wage? If participants were paid the prevailing wage, there would be no financial incentive to seek other employment. NYS would come to be regarded less as a service program and more as an employment program in competition with the private sector. As demand for a certain type of occupation declined, the wage level would be artificially sustained since the NYS prevailing wage would act as a floor on wages.

At first glance, the idea of paying a subsistence wage seems most appropriate to a service program. But just what is a subsistence wage? It would have to include food, housing and clothing. But what of NYS participants who chose to live at home? What allowances would be made for NYS participants supporting dependents? Where a nationwide subsistence wage formula has been set, as in VISTA, it is usually within 10 percent of the minimum wage.

Payment of the minimum wage, which is set by Congress, would have the advantages of relative equity and simplicity. Any other level of payment would be the subject of continued controversy.

Should enrollment be selective or universal? To limit the program to a target population of low-income or unemployed youth would cheat both the people served and those who serve. There is plenty of work to do in this country, enough to engage all young people who want to work. To restrict the number of those who serve to some target population would be to fall short of doing the work that needs to be done.

There is a second reason for universality. A targeted program tends to be stigmatizing. Members of the Neighborhood Youth Corps knew that enrollment was limited to those from poor families, and so did the people they worked for. By contrast, a program that includes young people from all walks of life can focus attention on the service to be performed.

Should national youth service be centralized or decentralized? Heavily decentralized. Some functions would have to rest with the federal government, for instance, the financial underwriting to assure the universality of service opportunities. The government also would see to it that constitutional and legal safeguards regarding discrimination and individual rights were upheld. And it would set forth briefly and simply the principles of operating the national youth service.

The federal government would not itself assign any national service participant to a position. Only in the case of national service work to be performed on lands operated by the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service would these units of the federal government negotiate job assignments with NYS applicants.

Perhaps the clearest reason for local control would arise when there seemed to be a danger of a regular employee being replaced by a national service participant. Was the sponsor trying to save money by making such a switch? Or were the funds for this position cut off by city hall or United Way so there was no option but to lay off the employee? While the national service law would

clearly prohibit replacement of employees by national service participants, the interpretation of individual cases could only be undertaken successfully at the local level. In the example cited, the NYS broker or matchmaker might well be a union member familiar with the financial situation at a given agency. Union officials would look to the union member for advice, and a potentially explosive situation would be prevented.

Local administration is also preferable because of its sensitivity to unforeseen needs. A periodic monitoring of the types of activities pursued by NYS participants would reveal the shifting pattern of demand for services. As new needs arose, NYS participants would offer some help and the NYS reporting system would provide an early warning of other initiatives that might be required.

Should the assignments be controlled by young people or by adults?

While few people agree on an age definition for youth, everyone agrees it is the period between childhood and adulthood. Children are powerless; they need guardians and advocates. Adults look after themselves. As young people pass from one state to the other, they need to experience the exercise of adult responsibilities. Yet each is an individual with a unique set of past experiences and current needs. No single answer can be given for all participants.

National service should encourage young people to participate actively in defining the jobs they do. Some would not be ready to negotiate their jobs. For them, a year of disciplined work experience would be all they could handle. Others would be eager to interview with several prospective sponsoring agencies, to select the most interesting one and to develop a definition of duties.

This structure, in which the young person is neither assigned a task without consultation nor allowed to do "his thing" without restraint, should foster the kinds of interaction between participant and supervisor most conducive to personal growth and maturation. The supervisors would insist on the participants doing their agreed-upon tasks, and also see that there was growing room for the participants. Young people would ideally seek opportunities with room for growth as well as the aid of supervisors who would help them steer their way through this learning process.

Operations and Costs

Given this set of guidelines how would NYS operate at the local level? To find out, let us put ourselves in the shoes of the two major parties: the young people who would serve and the beneficiaries of the service.

First the young people: virtually everyone in the given age range, say eighteen to twenty-four, would be entitled to enter NYS. The only exceptions to the principle of universality would be persons incapable of serving, such as those in hospital or prison or those who are extremely retarded and those in a situation likely to disrupt their ability to serve. This latter group would be comprised largely of people awaiting trial or major medical care. NYS would be open to many persons who would normally be excluded from military service or the

Peace Corps. Blindness, mild mental retardation and paraplegia would not bar anyone from NYS but each would be a signal to the administrator to offer special assistance with orientation and placement.

Every young person would be made aware of the opportunity to serve, by means of Presidential speeches, announcements in the media, notification through schools, churches and youth clubs and possibly by direct mail. Once the program was underway, the message would travel by the strongest medium of communication—word of mouth among friends and relatives.

Entry into NYS should be easy. The application forms would be readily available and no more than one page long. Applicants would be invited to an orientation session immediately on submission of their application forms, and fingerprinting would not be required. At the orientation, each eligible applicant would receive a voucher affirming the youth's eligibility for national service. The applicant would then interview one or more eligible sponsors. When mutual agreement on the duties of both the applicant and sponsor had been reached, it would be submitted to the NYS administrator for certification. Certification would normally be routine, and the entire process from application to enrollment could easily be accomplished in less than a month.

Any public or private nonprofit agency could become a sponsor for NYS as long as it was engaged in providing human, social or environmental services. The agency could request any number of NYS participants providing it agreed to supply supervision and in-service training as necessary and to reimburse the grantee \$200 for each participant. It would, of course, have to agree to the usual affirmations regarding nondiscrimination, abstention from political and religious activities and nondisplacement of employees. Once oriented to its responsibilities under NYS, the sponsor would interview one or more applicants until an agreement was reached.

The dismissal of NYS participants would be made individually, with extenuating circumstances given due weight. The guiding principle would be the participant's willingness to serve. The written agreement would spell out the duties and responsibilities of both participant and supervisor. The participant who was repeatedly late for work or neglectful of agreed-upon duties would appear to be giving a clear signal of an absence of willingness to serve. Dismissal would seem to be in order. By contrast, another participant simply might not be able to master an assigned job even while making every effort to do so. Here, an in-service training program or a lower-level job, accompanied by a renegotiated contract, would be indicated.

When sponsoring organizations failed to live up the terms of the agreement, the participant would be assisted in securing another placement and the sponsoring organization would be removed from the computer listing. Either young people or agencies who were dismissed for failing to comply with the terms of their agreements would normally be ineligible for reenrollment in NYS.

The bulk of the money needed to underwrite NYS would flow by grants from the federal government to the cities and states which would admin-

ister the program. A city department of human resources or a state youth division—typical grantees—would see to it that all young people knew about the program and that all public and nonprofit agencies knew how to apply for NYS participants. Also, the grantees would arrange for orientation of applicants and prospective sponsors, for engagement of brokers and matchmakers and for the payroll operations.

NYS funds would be awarded to selected voluntary agency grantees, like the National Urban League, the YMCA, the Girls Clubs of America or the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, to operate programs in several cities and states. While conditions of service for NYS participants would be the same, the involvement of voluntary agencies as grantees would allow innovative projects to be tested and comparisons to be made between voluntary and government-operated programs.

If the national youth service paid the minimum wage and avoided the acquisition of a lot of administrative lard, the federal government would spend \$5300 for each participant annually. Each sponsor would contribute \$200 for every NYS volunteer and would pay for the in-service training and supervisory costs.

A year ago, in November, 1975, one of every four people drawing unemployment compensation was under the age of twenty-five. These 720,000 young people received unemployment compensation—approximately the same amount which would be spent for a national youth service program with the same number of participants. Over half the states are drawing on federal taxes for unemployment benefits; thus tax money is already supporting nearly the same number of young people that could be expected to enroll in national service in a given year. Other tax funds used to combat juvenile crime and delinquency and to provide job training for young people, may be reduced by the establishment of NYS.

Giving National Youth Service a Chance

A program involving a million young people cannot help but have a significant social and economic impact. Once it becomes a regular feature of American life and teenagers view national service as a real option for their post-high school years, it will be interesting to observe the choices they make. Will they continue to enter into marriage, employment and educational institutions at the current rate or will there be market shifts. Will there be changes in crime rates as a result of national service?

Since 80 to 90 percent of the national service budget will flow into the pockets of the participants, their spending patterns may dictate some major economic change. As the economy goes through its ups and downs, it will become possible to assess the counter-cyclical effects of national service. Presumably, the rate of enrollment in national service will vary directly with the rate of youth unemployment. National service must also be examined carefully to de-

termine whether it leads to greater productivity in such areas as health and education. Will professionals in these fields, with full-time help from national service participants, devote a greater proportion of their time to activities at the professional level?

After service, some participants will go to work with their sponsors as regular employees, some will capitalize on their newly acquired skills and experience to get jobs elsewhere, and others will return to the world of formal education with a sense of purpose derived from the experience in national service. PLS made no promise of jobs after service, but the unemployment rate among participants fell from 70 percent at entry to 18 percent six months after completion of service.

The benefits of national service almost certainly will accrue most directly to those served and those who serve. In PLS in 1973, for example, it was found that the value of services rendered averaged just over \$7000 for each year of service contributed. The value to the participants is hard to quantify. But for those who said it was more valuable than going to college, and for the mentally retarded and severely handicapped young people together with those from the inner city where one young person in two is lucky to get a job, the rewards are at least as great as for those they served.

Of course, there are still many unresolved practical questions about the future operations and impact of a national youth service. However, such questions can only be answered by giving the proposal a chance and it is such a promising one that the risk of failure is worth taking.

The urban crisis is forcing many cities in the United States to stop rendering services because the cost of providing them is too high. A national youth service could jump into the gap and provide the human services that are the first to go when belts are tightened. Along with this, there is growing concern over youth unemployment and the transition from school to work and from youth to adulthood. These two factors would appear to produce the demand for some kind of national youth policy.

Not all needs, of course, can be met with a single program. However, if the American people believe that it is important to:

- . improve human, social and environmental services at a minimal cost; .
- . give young people a chance for at least one full year of work experience so they will not be refused a job simply because they never had one; .
- . enable young people to develop greater self-confidence and civic pride; .
- . offer young people a chance to test careers of interest to them; and .
- . rebuild a feeling of trust between young people and government, .

the nation will move quickly to guarantee all young people a chance to serve and to learn through a program of national youth service.