

Mandatory Public Service?

A new bill could force young adults to do two years of public service

■ What is it?

A new bill named the Universal Service Act of 2003, introduced by Democratic House of Representatives members Charles Rangel of New York and John Conyers of Michigan and Sen. Fritz Hollings of South Carolina, was the most recent mandatory-service proposal considered by Congress. Americans would be required to complete two years of service for the nation between the ages of 18 and 26 in one of various programs.

This service could include military time or active participation in programs such as Peace Corps, Teach for America or AmeriCorps. The president would determine the number of people needed and the means of selection. Deferments would be limited to those completing high school, up to the age of 20, with no exemptions for college or graduate students. The bill has not yet been acted upon.

Most recent proposals would provide some sort of payment for young people's service. One plan allows for four years of college tuition in exchange for two years of service. Participants who do not choose college might be able to apply for funds to pay for job-training programs or to help start a small business.

While many young people volunteer to join the U.S. military as an act of self-service, other programs such as AmeriCorps also draw more than 50,000 volunteers annually. In addition to tutoring children, building homes, cleaning up the environment and helping communities through disaster relief, AmeriCorps members work with 2,100 nonprofits, public agencies, and faith-based organizations. Other service programs, such as Teach for America, work toward eliminating educational inequality throughout the United States. Young people generally make up most of the volunteer staff who spend two years in low-income, urban areas to teach children.

"I've actually thought about joining AmeriCorps," said sophomore Jessica Keough. "I think it's a great program our country benefits from. Service like that teaches you so many things. I just think the main reason why people should really consider something like AmeriCorps is because it opens your eyes. It teaches you to be selfless and to appreciate what you have. It's also just nice to give back to those who are in need."

"Teach for America...is an opportunity that people don't seem to know much about," said sophomore Hayley Schools. "I truly admire those individuals that give up two years of their life to help children succeed. However, I don't feel mandatory service is necessary. As soon as I graduate college, I want to get out in the world and start working."

