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NYC Group to Use Obama “United We Serve” Effort to Fight Hunger by Leveraging Federal Nutrition Programs **Hunger Coalition Will Also Use Long-Term, Skilled Volunteers to Build Capacity**

The New York City Coalition Against Hunger announced that it is joining United We Serve, a national effort just launched by President and First Lady Obama to engage more Americans in serving their communities this summer. The Coalition said that the main focus of its participation in United We Serve will be to use citizen volunteers to work with the Coalition’s professional staff to increase participation in under-utilized federal nutrition assistance programs such as the Food Stamp (recently re-named the SNAP) Program and the Summer Meals Program for low-income children.

“We are thrilled to be participating in the President’s historic initiative in ways that will have the most concrete impact in reducing hunger,” said Coalition Executive Director Joel Berg. “The reality is that simply placing more untrained volunteers at food pantries and soup kitchens for short stints or holding additional canned food drives will only make a marginal dent in the soaring hunger and food insecurity in New York City, which, even before the Wall Street downturn, impacted more than 1.3 million city residents. That is why our greatest focus in this effort will be on using volunteers to help struggling New Yorkers obtain the federal nutrition assistance benefits to which they are legally entitled. Even a one percent increase in Food Stamp participation would provide a massive amount of extra food buying power that would dwarf the amount of food that could be provided by hundreds of charitable food drives. Using citizen volunteers to increase the use of highly effective government programs is a perfect public/private partnership.”

The Coalition will also train interested citizens to provide long-term, skilled volunteer aid to food pantries and soup kitchens in areas such as accounting, graphic design, strategic planning, writing and editing, fundraising, technology, marketing, and web design. One way citizens can do so is by serving full-time for a year in the Coalition’s AmeriCorps*VISTA Program while earning a small living stipend and an educational award (to apply, go to: <http://www.nyccah.org/programs/ameri-corps-vista>). A second way New Yorkers can help is by volunteering part-time for a long-range assignment that “adopts” a pantry or kitchen most in need of their unique skills, by going to www.hungervolunteer.org.

Said Victoria Dumbuya, the Coalition’s volunteer coordinator, “The truth is that relatively few pantries and kitchens need more untrained volunteers to serve soup or pack cans, and those that do tend to be in the outer boroughs where fewer people want to volunteer. Yet virtually all of these feeding agencies are in desperate need of long-term volunteers who can provide help with professional skills. That is why we are using United We Serve to try to educate New York and America on the kind of anti-hunger volunteer help that is needed most. We want to get the word out that, for an accountant or a web designer, five hours of providing web design or accounting help to a feeding agency – most of which are tiny and run by unpaid volunteers – is generally far more productive than five months of volunteering to serve soup.”

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United We Serve formally kicks off on June 22 and runs through September 11, which will be marked for the first time as a national day of service and remembrance. The initiative focuses on four key areas: education, health, energy and the environment, and community and economic renewal (which includes anti-hunger service). It is being led by the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency that improves lives and strengthens communities through volunteering and service.

“This summer, I’m calling on all of you to make volunteerism and community service part of your daily life and the life of this nation,” said President Obama in a video kicking off the initiative. “Economic recovery is as much about what you’re doing in your communities as what we’re doing in Washington – and it’s going to take all of us, working together.”

To make it easy for individuals to get involved, the Corporation created Serve.gov, a website that allows visitors to type in their zip code to find local volunteer opportunities, recruit volunteers by posting their organization’s projects, or get ideas for creating their own projects with friends, families, and neighbors. The Coalition’s volunteer opportunities are posted on that site, as well as on www.hungervolunteer.org

Continued Coalition Executive Director Berg, “All New Yorkers and all Americans have something to give, and we urge them to do so, but we want to ensure that their time is used as effectively as possible in ways that measurably reduce hunger. We are overjoyed that United We serve is helping us highlight opportunities for more citizens to do so.”

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