



For immediate release:
April 21, 2009

Contact: Alexandra Yannias, ayannias@nyccah.org
(212) 825-0028, ext. 212

New Obama / Kennedy Service Law to Expand Hunger Fight Advocates Call Bill a “Quantum Leap Forward” in Civic Engagement

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, signed into law today by President Obama after passing Congress with bi-partisan support, has the potential to significantly increase the involvement of national service participants and volunteers in anti-hunger activities, advocates said.

The new law not only expands the AmeriCorps national service program (a domestic Peace Corps that allows Americans to provide significant community service in exchange for educational awards) from the current level of 75,000 to a target level of 250,000 participants nationwide, but it also contains language making it clearer that AmeriCorps members can work on a wide range of projects to fight hunger, boost nutrition, and reduce poverty.

Joel Berg, the executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, has a unique perspective on the new law, having previously served in the Clinton Administration helping launch the AmeriCorps Program in 1993-1995, as well as currently running a nonprofit group that depends heavily upon AmeriCorps members. “The new law is a quantum leap forward in civic engagement, and it can dramatically increase the number of Americans engaged in long-term activities to fight hunger,” said Berg. “The top things we need to do to end hunger in America are to create living wage jobs and to expand and modernize the federal nutrition assistance safety net. AmeriCorps national service participants, who serve full or part-time for a year or work full-time for a summer, can significantly advance those goals, as well as help charities fill in the food gaps for hungry Americans. Such efforts achieve concrete, measurable results in neighborhoods nationwide, while building a sense of community, promoting personal responsibility, and expanding educational opportunity. We are thrilled that the President and Congress are sending a clear message that community service is a centerpiece of citizenship, and we commend Governor Paterson and Mayor Bloomberg for taking steps to make service both practical and useful.”

AmeriCorps members sponsored by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger have: helped staff federally-funded summer food service sites for low-income kids; expanded community gardens; increased the use of food stamp (SNAP) benefits at farmers' markets; assisted low-income working families in obtaining tax refunds; staffed faith-based and secular food pantries and soup kitchens; helped families enroll in federal nutrition assistance programs; increased coordination between community-based agencies; and helped feeding agencies obtain more volunteers, money, and food. Continued Berg, “We know that AmeriCorps anti-hunger projects can work because they *already have* worked. The new language in the bill only strengthens our case that a significant number of the new AmeriCorps slots should be allotted for anti-hunger projects. We look forward to working with the federal, state, and local governments in ensuring that the expansion of such efforts is as effective as it is rapid.”