

SERVICE

A Way to Contribute

Universal national service to meet real need, rebuild belonging, and prepare a generation for the age of AI.

PILLAR 9 · CIVIC LIFE, SERVICE, AND NATIONAL RENEWAL

AT A GLANCE

The problem

A loneliness epidemic with mortality effects comparable to smoking, trust at historic lows, and AI reshaping entry-level work.

The proposal

Universal national service reached through an evaluated voluntary build-out; communities treated as survival infrastructure.

Cost & funding

Large at full scale; documented returns at program scale, which is why the build-out is staged.

Evidence strength

Strong for targeted programs (randomized trials); the universal model is unproven and the universal expectation is conditional on the build-out proving it.

Principal risk

Pressure and capacity: an expectation pressed before real places exist for everyone, benefit-linked pressure landing hardest on those who need the benefits most, or service displacing paid workers.

Success looks like

Completion rates across class and region; social connection and trust measures moving.

Summary

People need more than an income. They need purpose, dignity, belonging, and a way to contribute something that matters, and a country that offers only a paycheck and a screen has not met those needs. That gap is about to get wider. The International Monetary Fund estimates that about 40 percent of jobs worldwide, and roughly 60 percent in advanced economies like ours, are exposed to artificial intelligence, and the World Economic Forum projects tens of millions of roles displaced within the decade even as new ones are created. The country is also lonelier and more disconnected than it has been in generations, and trust in one another and in shared institutions has frayed. We need a way to give people structure, skills, and a place in something larger, and to point a generation's talent toward real human need rather than toward whatever the attention economy happens to reward.

This brief proposes universal national service, a universal expectation of a service term for every young American, backed by substantial incentives and honestly named as exactly that, modeled on a program this country has already run successfully. Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps put nearly three million young Americans to work in less than a decade, planting some three billion trees and building hundreds of state parks, and it was among the most popular programs of its era, supported across party lines. The proposal here updates that idea for today: an obligation to serve, with a wide menu of civilian options as well as military service, paid, and rewarded with education benefits and a path to citizenship in return. It builds on living models like AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps, though it can take the form of a new program built for the scale of the moment. And it treats strong local communities not as nostalgia but as survival infrastructure worth rebuilding.

The Principle

People need a way to contribute. Work, service, and membership in something larger are not luxuries layered on top of survival; they are part of what makes a life feel worth living, and a society that strips them away produces the isolation, despair, and resentment we now see. Two commitments follow. First, service should be a shared obligation that asks something of everyone and invests in everyone in return, because a duty shared across class, region, and background is one of the few things that still binds a country together, and because there is real work that needs doing. We already accept that citizenship carries obligations, jury duty among them; a term of service is one more, and a more meaningful one. Second, the human-scale institutions where belonging actually happens deserve to be treated as essential infrastructure rather than left to wither. This is not a sentimental throwback. It is how a country holds together and how it survives a shock.

The System Failure

Civic life has been hollowed out from several directions at once. Work for many people has become less secure and less meaningful, the institutions that used to knit people together have thinned, and daily life has moved onto screens that simulate connection without delivering it. The result is measurable. The Surgeon General declared loneliness an epidemic in 2023: about half of American adults report experiencing it, and social isolation raises the risk of premature death by 29 percent, an effect comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.¹ The social trust a democracy runs on has fallen with it. The share of Americans who say most people can be trusted has dropped from 46 percent in 1972 to 34 percent today, and trust in the federal government to do the right thing has collapsed from 77 percent six decades ago to 22 percent. Now a technological shock is arriving on top of that. The displacement AI is bringing will hit hardest at exactly the entry-level and routine work that has long been how young people get a start, and we have no system in place to channel that disruption, to retrain people, or to direct human effort toward the enormous amount of care, building, and stewardship the country actually needs done.

Underneath it is a strategic blind spot. We spent decades centralizing and professionalizing the systems people depend on while letting local, human-scale capacity erode, and then we are surprised when communities cannot care for themselves in a crisis. When disaster hits, the places that hold together are the ones with dense local networks: neighbors who know each other, institutions that can mobilize, people organized to help. We have treated those networks as nice-to-haves rather than as the survival infrastructure they are, and the gap shows up every time the larger systems fail.

The Proposal

Universal National Service

1. **Make a term of national service a universal expectation.** Establish a service term as the national default for every young American, written into law and backed by substantial incentives, with a genuine choice of how to serve. The honest name matters: because refusal carries no fine and no criminal record, only the loss of the attached benefits, this is not a mandate in the conscription sense, and the platform does not pretend otherwise. It is a universal expectation, the way the norm of finishing high school is universal without being criminally enforced. A term of service, paid, with a broad menu of options, gives people structure, skills, and a stake in their communities, and creates a shared experience that crosses the lines of class, region, and background that otherwise divide us. The honest sequencing matters: if the full expectation cannot be written into law at once, the path to it runs through serious incentives and a hard nudge, tying significant education benefits, hiring preference, and other real advantages to service, strong enough that opting out costs something, until the expectation becomes universal in practice and then in law. The model, stated once and completely: registration at eighteen, universal accommodations, an appeals process before any consequence attaches, and a cost of refusal that is exactly the attached benefits, the education award, hiring preferences, and related advantages, never a fine and never a criminal record. And the equity risk of incentive-backed universality is named rather than hidden: benefit-linked pressure lands hardest on young people who need the education award most, while the affluent can shrug it off, so the design answers with benefits that bind at every income (hiring preference across federal employment and major federal contractors is worth something to a rich kid too), participation tracked and published by income band, and a falsifiability tooth: if participation skews by class, the incentive design changes before the expectation expands, and if the design cannot sustain near-universal participation at all, that is evidence against the expectation, not a reason to reach for compulsion. The Civilian Conservation Corps showed this can be done at scale² and stay broadly popular, and a number of democracies already require a term of national service of their young people. The obligation is shared; the path is chosen.

2. **Build the tracks around what the country actually needs.** Anchor service in real work across many disciplines, not one: rebuilding infrastructure, care for children and elders, teaching and tutoring, conservation and climate resilience, public health, building housing, disaster preparedness and response, food and agriculture, and the digital and civic capacity communities lack. Military service is one track among many, not the default. AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps are proof these pathways can work, and the causal evidence is strongest exactly where the need is greatest: in a randomized trial across ten sites, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program for young people out of school and out of work raised earnings 20 percent and diploma or GED attainment 22 percentage points three years later.³ Structured, paid service changes trajectories. Stated with the platform's usual care: that trial covered disconnected youth in a specific, intensive program, so it proves the mechanism, not that a universal program performs identically for every young American, which is one more reason the sequencing below scales through evaluated expansion rather than a single leap to universality. The program can expand what exists or stand up something new built for this scale. The point is to match a generation's effort to genuine human need at the very moment AI is poised to displace so much routine work.
3. **Invest in the people who serve, and open a path to citizenship through service.** Make service a two-way deal. In return, offer substantial education benefits along the lines of the G.I. Bill, support for tuition or student debt, and pathways into careers in the fields where people served. And recognize national service as an earned route to citizenship, extending to civilian service the logic the country already applies to military service, where serving has long been a path to naturalization. Service should ask something of people, and invest in them in return.

Communities as Survival Infrastructure

The second half of this pillar treats strong local communities as a matter of national strength, and invests in them directly.

4. **Rebuild the institutions where belonging happens.** Invest in the human-scale institutions that hold communities together and let them help themselves: libraries and community centers, local service corps, cooperatives, community health workers, local food systems, and the broad ecosystem of unions, congregations, neighborhood groups, and mutual-aid networks. These are where people find connection, where help is organized, and where a community's capacity to weather hard times actually lives.

5. **Strengthen the local layer of national resilience.** Recognize, in funding and in policy, that local capacity is part of how the country survives shocks, and support it as such: local emergency and mutual-aid networks, distributed local systems, and the community institutions that do the first and most important work when larger systems fail. This connects directly to the resilience agenda in the climate and security pillars, where strong communities are the foundation that federal coordination is meant to protect, not replace.
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The Operational Design

Outside reviewers correctly said the hard parameters were missing, so here they are, stated as the platform's proposal and revisable by the same evidence rules as everything else.

Who and when: every young American at eighteen through twenty-four, with a completion window to twenty-six so that education, apprenticeship, caregiving, or work can come first; the obligation flexes around a life, not the reverse. **How long:** a twelve-month standard term, with a six-month option for documented hardship, caregiving, or disability-adjusted service, and part-time equivalents that sum to the same service. **What it pays:** full pay at no less than the local minimum wage, housing or a housing allowance and meals where the placement requires relocation, health coverage during service, and a \$10,000 education award per completed year usable for tuition, training, or student-debt repayment. Service should never cost a participant money, and a participant supporting a family should be able to serve without falling behind.

Exemptions and accommodation, written broadly: conscientious objection honored with civilian-only tracks; disability accommodated with adapted placements, never exclusion; primary caregivers, including young parents, offered local, flexible, or deferred service; genuine hardship deferred without penalty; and an appeals process with due process before any consequence attaches. **What refusal costs, exactly:** the attached benefits and nothing more, the education award, hiring preferences, and related advantages, as the stress-test page already commits: no criminal penalty, no civil fine, no one jailed, ever, and if the program cannot be administered on those terms it stays voluntary. **Worker protections:** placements cannot supplant existing paid positions, host organizations certify non-displacement subject to audit, unions are consulted where placements touch organized workplaces, and participants get workplace-safety and anti-harassment protections with an independent reporting channel. **Immigration:** service is open to citizens and lawful residents alike, and civilian service earns the same expedited citizenship path military service already does.

Scale and cost, honestly: roughly four million Americans turn eighteen each year, so a universal program at maturity is millions of participants and real money, and the honest arithmetic is stated rather than rounded down: at the stipend and award levels above, four million participants means roughly \$60 billion a year in wage-floor stipends and \$40 billion in education awards before a dollar of health coverage, housing, or administration, so the mature program is at least \$100 billion annually and plausibly well above it, which is why The Ledger lists it as not yet scored and why the build-out is staged: capacity is proven at each expansion stage, the evaluations are binding, and the expectation becomes law only when a real, funded place exists for everyone who would be asked.

Implementation Pathway

Universal service requires federal legislation and sustained funding, and it can be built up from the service programs that already exist, scaled deliberately rather than created overnight. The sequencing is the realistic part. Start by expanding paid slots and the menu of tracks and attaching serious benefits to service, so that participation climbs toward universal even before the expectation is law, then write the expectation into statute once the capacity to place everyone exists, since an obligation without enough real, funded options would be an empty one. The community-institution investments run across all three levels of government and often work best as support for what local groups are already doing. Much of this is a consistent decision to value, fund, and rebuild the human-scale layer of American life that has been allowed to decay.

Funding and Public-Value Logic

Evaluated service programs have produced substantial modeled social returns, and the claim is carried at exactly that strength: those findings do not establish the return of a universal program at four-million-person scale, which is precisely what the staged expansion exists to test.⁴ Participants do real work the country needs, in infrastructure, care, conservation, education, and disaster preparedness, and they come out with skills, direction, and a stake in their communities, while the education benefits are an investment in people that returns over a lifetime, exactly as the G.I. Bill did. The quantified evidence points the same direction. An independent benefit-cost analysis commissioned by a service coalition put the return on AmeriCorps and Senior Corps at \$17.30 per federal dollar, and two limits travel with that number: it monetizes benefits to society, participants, and governments combined, not federal budget savings, and it measures selected existing programs with working placement pipelines, not universal enrollment; AmeriCorps' own program-level studies, including roughly \$12 returned per dollar in disaster response, land in the same range. The randomized ChalleNGe results show where the returns come from: higher earnings and credentials for the young people least likely to get either otherwise. The Civilian Conservation Corps was judged at the time to have returned more in value than it cost, even before counting the gains to the workers themselves. Set against the alternative, the honest version of which is rapid occupational churn rather than mass displacement, the WEF projects roughly 92 million jobs displaced and 170 million created this decade,⁵ and the IMF finds about 60 percent of advanced-economy jobs exposed to AI, with roughly half of those complemented rather than replaced⁶, the case is that a generation entering a labor market being redrawn under it needs structure, skills, and a first rung, and the cost of leaving them without one is higher than the cost of the program. The deepest return is hard to put on a balance sheet but real: people with purpose and belonging are healthier, more resilient, and better citizens.

Risks and Guardrails

A universal expectation has to be built so that it expands opportunity rather than coercing labor, which means real, paid, accessible options for everyone, a genuine choice of track including non-military service, and clear accommodation for conscientious objection, disability, and individual circumstance. It cannot become a track that only the already-comfortable can navigate or a source of cheap labor that displaces paid workers; service should complement the workforce, not undercut it, and participants should be paid and protected. The honest tension in any universal expectation is liberty, and the answer is that this is a defined, paid civic duty with broad choice and real investment in return, much closer to jury duty than to conscription, not an open-ended claim on anyone's life. Investment in community institutions should support what communities are already building rather than impose a model from Washington. And this pillar complements the material foundations in the rest of the platform rather than substituting for them; belonging is not a replacement for healthcare or housing, it is the layer that sits alongside them.

Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on participation, skills, connection, and resilience.

- The share of young people completing a term of service, and the breadth of participation across class, region, and background.
- Education benefits delivered, and the jobs and further service participants move into, especially in AI-exposed fields.
- Measures of social connection, loneliness, and trust in communities and institutions over time.
- Real national needs met by service: housing built, acres restored, students tutored, elders cared for, communities prepared.
- Local resilience capacity, and how communities fare when larger systems are disrupted.

Opposition and Responses

Some will say universal service is forced labor or a backdoor draft. It is a paid civic duty with a wide choice of civilian tracks, real education benefits, a path to citizenship, and accommodation for conscientious objection and individual circumstance, far closer to jury duty than to conscription. The country already accepts that citizenship carries obligations, and the historical model this draws on, the Civilian Conservation Corps, was paid and one of the most popular government programs we have ever run.

Some will say it is too expensive or too soft to be a priority. The disconnection it addresses is not soft; the Surgeon General's own advisory puts the mortality effect of isolation on par with smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and it drives measurable costs in health, addiction, and social breakdown. And the timing makes it urgent rather than optional: with AI poised to displace a large share of routine and entry-level work, a structure that retrains people and channels their effort toward real need is among the most practical things government can build. Some will say government cannot create community. It cannot manufacture belonging by decree, which is exactly why this pillar funds and strengthens the local institutions where belonging actually forms rather than trying to run them from above. And some will call the focus on community nostalgic. It is the opposite of nostalgic; it is a hard-headed recognition that local capacity is survival infrastructure, the thing that determines whether a community makes it through the next crisis.

What Would Change Our Position

The expectation is explicitly conditional, which makes this the platform's most falsifiable plank by design: it becomes law only if the voluntary build-out proves the model at scale. If expanded paid service showed outcomes far below the ChalleNGe results, the mechanism does not generalize and the expectation step dies, leaving a strong voluntary system. If service placements displaced paid workers, the labor protections failed and expansion pauses. If per-participant costs at scale swamped the measured benefits, the program shrinks to the tracks that pay their way. A duty this large has to earn itself with evidence at every stage, and the sequencing exists so that it must.

Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. People need more than a paycheck. They need a purpose, a place, and a way to be useful to something bigger than themselves, and that need is about to get sharper as AI reshapes the world of work. So ask it of everyone: a real, paid term of service, rebuilding infrastructure, caring for kids and elders, restoring the land, teaching, preparing communities for disaster, and invest in them in return with help paying for their education and a path to citizenship for those who serve. We have done this before. Roosevelt's Tree Army planted three billion trees and gave a lost generation a start. We can do it again, for this generation, in this moment.

SOURCES

1. U.S. Surgeon General advisory on the epidemic of loneliness and isolation (2023) [↔](#)
2. National Park Service, the Civilian Conservation Corps: ~3 million enrolled [↔](#)

3. MDRC, "Staying the Course": randomized evaluation of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program ↵
4. Voices for National Service, independent benefit-cost analysis of national-service programs (service-advocacy coalition publishing an independent analysis; flagged accordingly) ↵
5. World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025: ~92 million jobs displaced, ~170 million created by 2030 ↵
6. IMF: about 60% of advanced-economy jobs exposed to AI, roughly half potentially complemented ↵