The Case for National Service

Millions of Americans want to help their community, their country, their world. Here's a plan to put those ideas into action.

By Richard Stengel

Ashoka

Founder: Bill Drayton

When: 1980 in Washington, D.C.

Focus: Developed the concept of "social entrepreneurship" or investing in social change like a business and demanding measurable results. The program supports ambitious advocates not just with funding but also with a network of fellow do-gooders to call on for help as the entrepreneurs transform their initial work into large scale movements.

Impact: Ashoka has funded almost 2,000 fellows in 70 countries over the past 26 years. The organization offers living stipends to people with proven, early-stage ventures they wish to expand. Muhammad Yunus, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for his microfinance work, is just one of the established activists who serve as part of the Ashoka network offering guidance to others. Ashoka initially emphasized Third World projects, but in 2000 it expanded to the U.S.

Echon Green

In addition to notable Ashoka fellows, the group supports young activists like Adam Green, founder of Rocking the Boat, who teaches traditional boat-building skills to high schoolers in the Bronx, N.Y.

The Next Wave

Omidyar Network

Established by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, the group supports for-profit and nonprofit endeavors that give power to individuals. Its ventures range from an online community for patients to a mobile-phone-based marketplace.

Echoing Green

Since 1987, Echoing Green has supported young activists by investing in their ideas and connecting them to each other. It has awarded $25 million in grants to nearly 450 social entrepreneurs, who receive two-year fellowships.

New Profit

Venture philanthropy—inspired by venture capital's focus on high-stakes, high-impact projects such as NRG, whose five-year plan will double its number of schools—gives multi-year support to a wide variety of groups. New Profit's $30 million fund lets individuals pool their resources and spread their risk by investing in tightly screened organizations.

Draper Richards Foundation

This group gives funding, business mentoring, and fellowships to early-stage social entrepreneurs as they begin their organizations. Grants tackle issues from AIDS education in Africa to music in U.S. public schools.