



**Be Peace. Choose Peace. Create Peace.**

## Statement of Support for the Building Civic Bridges Act

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Peace Through Action USA supports the Building Civic Bridges Act (H.R. 6843 of the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress), legislation that authorizes AmeriCorps to engage the American people, AmeriCorps members, and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in civic bridgebuilding. We urge the Congress to promptly pass the Building Civic Bridges Act and President Biden to enact the legislation.

The United States is in the throes of civic and social upheaval. Evidence of such distress is abundant. It includes low levels of trust in government, media, and other societal institutions<sup>1</sup>; stark polarization of the population along ideological, cultural, and geographic lines<sup>2</sup>; entrenched systemic biases and prejudices against people who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color, LGBTQ+, with disabilities, and living in poverty; and high levels of interpersonal aggression and violence, including incivility.<sup>3</sup>

Polarization of the American people in our beliefs, values, attitudes toward our peer Americans, and public policy positions has reached a state of toxicity. Toxic polarization is a form of interpersonal and community aggression and can lead to violence.

As an organization seeking to increase peace and decrease aggression and violence between people and within communities in the United States, Peace Through Action USA welcomes governmental support and public funding, such as would be provided through the Building Civic Bridges Act, for activities which diminish polarization, foster respect between diverse communities, build empathy, strengthen relationships across lines of difference, strengthen belonging, and forge a sense of common civic purpose.

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for volunteerism and national service, is a worthy custodian of the civic bridgebuilding responsibilities that the Building Civic Bridges Act would entrust to it. These responsibilities are perfectly matched to the agency's current purposes as established by the Congress, among which is the renewal of "the *ethic of civic responsibility* and the *spirit of community* and service throughout the *varied and diverse communities* of the United States"<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added).

Not only do the purpose and provisions of the Building Civic Bridges Act have merit in their own right, the legislation also should give impetus to the Congress to include civic and social engagement generally (of which civic bridgebuilding is one type) as a focus area for AmeriCorps in the national service laws.

Examples of civic and social engagement activities additional to civic bridgebuilding include civic education, peace education, citizenship classes, empathy and compassion cultivation, nonviolent compassionate communication, mindfulness practices, bias reduction, bystander intervention,

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<sup>1</sup> American Academy of Arts and Sciences. (2020). Our common purpose: Reinventing American democracy for the 21st Century. Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center. (2020). Political polarization. Retrieved July 9, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/political-polarization/>

<sup>3</sup> Ray Williams. (2016). The rise of incivility and what to do about it. Psychology Today. Available from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201610/the-rise-incivility-and-what-do-about-it>.

<sup>4</sup> Corporation for National and Community Service. (2020, July 9). About CNCS: Legislation. Retrieved from Corporation for National and Community Service: <https://www.nationalservice.gov/about/legislation>

nonviolent conflict resolution, alternative community protection, violence interruption, truth-telling, reconciliation, and healing.

It is our contention that AmeriCorps and its programs are well suited to address, but do not yet adequately address, the national challenges of weak civic engagement, systemic discrimination, and interpersonal and community violence. Why? Because the national service laws do not explicitly authorize the agency to do so.

Adding civic and social engagement writ large as a focus area for AmeriCorps would create possibilities for states, tribes, communities, community-based organizations, and faith-based organizations to apply volunteering and national service strategies and resources to the *full range* of their civic and social engagement challenges and solutions.

Also, adding civic and social engagement as a focus area would serve to invite into volunteering and national service more Americans with lived experience as survivors of aggression and violence; education and practice experience in disciplines such as civil affairs, community organizing, diplomacy, peacebuilding, and political science; and people for whom social justice, violence prevention, and peace promotion are paramount.

Peace Through Action USA requests the Congress and the Biden Administration, as they consider the Building Civic Bridges Act and other national service legislation, to adopt our recommendation that the national service laws be amended to identify civic and social engagement as a focus area of AmeriCorps, fully and permanently.

[Peace Through Action USA](#) is missioned to achieve peace between people and within communities in the United States of America by promoting caring action. We activate and equip Americans to implement practical peaceful solutions to aggression and violence in their communities and our country. Our mission activities contribute to the advancement of a nation abundant with peaceful people applying peaceful practices and creating peaceful places. Peace Through Action USA is a national-scope, charitable, civic and social capital-building organization.

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