In late 2008 and early 2009, Senators Hatch and Kennedy spearheaded a bi-partisan effort to write and pass the Serve America Act, later renamed to honor Senator Kennedy. In late April of 2009, President Obama signed the legislation into law. The Kennedy Serve America Act (KSAA) has several important new programs to help the nonprofit sector and provides for the considerable expansion of the existing national service programs. Although the appropriations process for the various components of the Act remain incomplete, it promises to provide many dollars and volunteer hours for the nonprofit sector. In addition, many local governments and school districts may be helped through some provisions, in particular the service programs, of the Act. Much has been made of this new Act, but what will it really mean for Utah’s local governments and nonprofits? It may be too soon to know for sure, but this article highlights several of the major provisions and how nonprofits, foundations, and local governments can be prepare to take full advantage of these opportunities.

The federal agency charged with implementation of the Act is the Corporation for National Civic Participation. The agency is currently developing new parameters for program evaluation of the service programs and the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) guidelines for new funding. The first thing you may want to do is familiarize yourself with the website of the corporation (http://www.nationalservice.gov/). Through this website you can read a summary of the KSAA and get more information about the various programs which will come out of this legislation. All NOFOs will be posted here as they become available. In addition, the eGrants electronic application system is accessed from this website. Previous applicants to the national service programs may already be familiar with this system. Others will need to create an account for your organization in order to file applications.

One of the most significant aspects of the KSAA is the expansion of the national service programs. They are comprised of several specific programs including Americorps, VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) and SeniorCorps. These several programs support volunteers who spend a year in full-time service to the nonprofit sector. In general, these supports include training, a stipend, and an education benefit for the volunteers. There are currently 75,000 volunteers serving nonprofits in the U.S.; KSAA seeks to expand this number to 250,000 in the next few years. What this means for Utah nonprofits is the possibility of additional direct service (Americorps) and capacity building (VISTA) volunteers. A recent article in the Chronicle on Philanthropy suggests that many nonprofits may not be prepared for this influx of volunteers. If your organization has a project or position that could be completed by a trained and enthusiastic volunteer, you may want to consider applying to sponsor an Americorp or VISTA project.

One of the most important things nonprofits can do to prepare for the increase in volunteers is be ready to manage them. If the organization you help lead does not have a system in place to recruit, manage, supervise, evaluate, and motivate volunteers – consider building this program now. Find a volunteer, perhaps a board member, that would help the organization prepare to receive a national service program volunteer. This likely entails attending training and developing new policies and procedures that will support effective volunteering within the nonprofit. Excellent training opportunities exist through many organizations in Utah. These include the Utah Nonprofits Association, the Utah Commission on Volunteers conference, and the Nonprofit Academy for Excellence through Professional Education at the University of Utah. A more in-depth educational opportunity can also be found in a new summer class on voluntarism being offered through the University of Utah Masters of Public Administration program. Once you have designed a volunteer program, your organization may need assistance in putting this system in place. You may want to apply for funds from the Volunteer Generation Fund. This provision of the KSAA seeks to increase organizational capacity for the effective use of volunteers to further the mission. In particular, this fund will support the coordination, training and management of volunteers. The NOFO on the Volunteer Generation Fund is expected in March 2010.

Perhaps the most well known new provision of the KSAA is the creation of the Social Innovation Fund (SIF). The SIF has similar goals to those of the new White House Social Innovation office, but is an independent program which will be operated through the Corporation for National Community Service. This new fund seeks to create a national network of experienced grantmakers who will combine federal and private dollars to make grants in support of innovative programs that effectively address community needs. The corporation states that in the first round of grants it will be most interested in funding late-stage promising innovations. They anticipate that the NOFO will be issued in winter of 2010 and the applications will be due sometime in the spring. The corporation anticipates announcing the grants in early summer 2010.
The corporation will not fund nonprofits directly. Rather, the corporation will accept applications from experienced grantmakers, or teams of grantmakers, who already know the needs and innovative solutions that are working in their communities. Foundations can prepare for the SIF by looking for partners and potential grantees now. Grants to these funding intermediaries will range from $1 million to $10 million over a five year period and require a dollar-for-dollar cash match. Grantmakers will then re-grant these funds to innovative nonprofits in amounts of at least $100,000 per year over three to five year grant periods. Nonprofits are also required to provide a dollar-for-dollar cash match to receive these funds. The corporation is encouraging collaboration among applicants. Several grantmakers in a geographic area may partner to offer the best combination of expertise across communities and across functional areas. The priority of the Corporation for National Community Service is to balance the geographic distribution of the SIF across the country. The corporation is also encouraging grantmakers to identify programs they are interested in funding as part of their application. Some grantmakers will be awarded SIF grant monies and will accept competitive applications from nonprofits after the awards are made. However, most funds will be awarded to grantmakers that have identified nonprofit innovations and include them with their applications. Nonprofit programs most likely to be funded will have a refined model that addresses community needs and is ready to replicate. Successful nonprofit applicants will also need to have existing evidence of effectiveness that is based on rigorous evaluative measures.

The SIF may be inaccessible for many nonprofits because of the required cash match. In order to expand access, the corporation has indicated that grantmakers will be able to assist nonprofits in raising their part of the matching funds. Also, since the grants will be awarded over three to five year periods, it is likely that nonprofits will be allowed to raise matching funds on an annual basis. Obviously in this difficult economic climate, even this may be inaccessible for many. This should be considered, however, as you prepare or update your fundraising plan for the ensuing year. The funding priorities areas will be identified in the NOFO but will be a subset of those identified in the Act, which are: education, healthy futures, clean energy, veterans, and opportunity. If your organization has an innovative program with demonstrated success, and you would like to address even more need by increasing the scale of this program, contact existing grantmakers to learn if they plan to apply for a SIF grant now. If your program is included with their application, you can begin raising matching funds now and can let your other donors know that their donation to this innovative program may be tripled through the SIF ($1 federal government, $1 grantmaker match, $1 nonprofit match).

There are several other provisions in the KSAA but until the appropriations process is complete, no one knows which will actually be implemented. The information that is currently available suggests that the expansion of the national service programs, the Social Innovation Fund, and the Volunteer Generation Fund are the most likely to be implemented within the next year. As you engage in planning for the next year, consider how these new and expanded opportunities may complement your strategy and prepare the organization to take advantage of them.