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Bill to Reauthorize AmeriCorps Fails by One Vote in House

By Libby George, CQ Staff

Legislation to renew and expand community service programs failed on the House floor Wednesday, less than a week after a nearly identical bill was pulled in the face of a GOP motion to recommit.

Falling by 277-140 — under suspension of the rules, it needed a two-thirds majority to pass — the bill (HR 5563) would renew for five years the Corporation for National and Community Service, best-known for its AmeriCorps program (PL 101-610). It was one short, needing 278 votes in this case.

While most members called the legislation a “win-win,” some fiscally conservative Republicans complained about its policy of paying people to volunteer.

“I think it has as its premise that we won’t have volunteerism in America unless we pay for it,” Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., said during floor debate on March 11. “Paid volunteerism is not a good principle in my point of view.”

The new bill incorporated the text of the Republican motion to recommit that led to the demise of the earlier measure (HR 2857), which Democratic leaders pulled March 6. That language would require organizations receiving program grants to run criminal background checks on volunteers and bar individuals convicted of sex crimes or murder from participating in programs authorized under the bill.

Last week’s motion to recommit called for the legislation to be returned to the floor “promptly,” rather than the customary “forthwith.” The change would have had the effect of sending the bill to the Education and Labor Committee — essentially killing it for that day.

Panel Chairman George Miller, D-Calif., said such background checks are already required by law. However, voting against the motion would be difficult for Democratic members to explain to voters.

Miller requested unanimous consent to change “promptly” to “forthwith,” but Republicans refused unless Miller also agreed to add a Senate-passed bill (HR 3773) to overhaul electronic surveillance law.

House Democratic leaders have insisted on negotiating their own deal with the Senate on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA, PL 95-511) rewrite, despite relentless GOP efforts to force an up-or-down vote on the Senate language.

“It was bipartisan in the Rules Committee, it was bipartisan on the floor, it was bipartisan until the gentleman’s party decided to try and insert the FISA bill on the floor,” Miller said.

The national service legislation also incorporates the 10 amendments adopted on the House floor March 6 before the bill was pulled. Those added provisions included the creation of new service initiatives, such as a “Silver Scholarship” program for people 55 and older who perform 600 hours of service. Another amendment calls for the creation of an Energy Conservation Corps, which would seek to address the nation’s energy and transportation infrastructure needs while providing work and service opportunities.

The underlying bill — which, other than the amendments and the motion to recommit language, is identical to the earlier legislation approved, 44-0, by the Education and Labor panel in June — would authorize an expansion of AmeriCorps by a third, to 100,000 workers. It also would create a National Office of Outreach and Recruitment, which Democrats say the organization needs to bolster its recruiting efforts among minority populations.

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