

The Building Civic Bridges Act

Addressing Polarization and Division in the United States

Polarization and division in the United States have reached such a point that it threatens our strength domestically and overseas. A healthy religiously, racially, and ethnically diverse democracy relies on everyday citizens to live, work, and serve alongside people who believe very differently than they do. In response, the Bipartisan Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship recently suggested expanding civic bridgebuilding capacity to address toxic polarization at its source. Creating and maintaining solid, lasting person-to-person relationships across differences and reframing our sense of common purpose is the key to moving forward.

This century has seen significant growth in local innovations in civic bridgebuilding—a field comprised of local leaders, dedicated nonprofits, coalitions, and invested philanthropic partners—which has grown in strength and dedicated collective efforts to address our national polarization. Federal support for social cohesion efforts supports this work as a key national priority and establishes a base from which to grow in the future.

A Bill to Support Community Civic Bridgebuilding to Heal Divides

The bill would establish a new, non-partisan pilot program, led by an Office of Civic Bridgebuilding, within AmeriCorps focused on building relationships across lines of difference. The program would have four core pillars:

- Administering a grant program to support civic bridgebuilding programs across the nation;
- Supporting the training of AmeriCorps members in civic bridgebuilding skills and techniques;
- Supporting research on civic bridgebuilding, civic engagement, and social cohesion; and
- Activating a public conversation about the importance of civic bridgebuilding by serving a key role as both a convening and coordinating partner to the national civic bridgebuilding movement — providing resources, network, and collaboration opportunities to the field.

Grant funding will be allocated on a competitive basis, and funding will primarily focus on supporting organizations and spaces dedicated to the revitalization of civic culture in the United States. The Office of Civic Bridgebuilding will fund nonprofits, public institutions, schools, and religious groups, among others, striving to heal toxic polarization in the United States through civic bridgebuilding and community reconciliation. Oversight would involve peer review as well as a review of activities by the Government Accountability Office. Proposed initiatives must:

- Cite credible research supporting the proposed approach for the project;
- Provide evidence of engaging diverse communities;
- Ensure the safety of all participants involved in the project;
- Explicitly focus on bridging divides through community-focused projects, relationship building and sustaining, or addressing the root causes of polarization; and
- Report back on outcomes to track effectiveness.

This bill will promote the ability of local communities to tackle sources of division while empowering participants and organizations with a foundation on which they can address contentious issues and ultimately, bridge divides.

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