This week the Peace Corps celebrates its birthday and has designated Peace Corps Week as an opportunity for former Volunteers to share their knowledge and experiences with their communities in the United States. Volunteers take this opportunity to educate Americans back home about the people with whom they lived and worked.

One of the great sons of Maryland, Sargent Shriver, was asked by President Kennedy to create the Peace Corps and in March 1961, was appointed its founding Director. Sarge's vision for the Peace Corps was straightforward and strong: “to permit Americans to participate directly, personally, and effectively in this struggle for human dignity.”

Sarge dedicated his life to public service and has become one of the greatest public servants in the history of our nation. A native of the State of Maryland, and in fact a member of one of the Free State's founding families, Sargent Shriver has dedicated his life to improving the lives of others. In nearly six years at the Peace Corps, Sarge developed programs in 55 countries with more than 14,500 volunteers. Forty-two years later, the solid foundation that he created has only strengthened and expanded. Today, 170,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in 137 countries.

I am proud to know and honor Sargent Shriver, and feel it is particularly relevant to share the contributions he has made to our state and to our country this week as we celebrate the birthday of the Peace Corps, recognize our nation's volunteers and promote the importance of volunteering.

Thanks to celebrated citizens like Sarge, Maryland has a rich history of volunteering. Just over 13 years ago, Volunteer Maryland was created by the Governor’s Advisory Board on Service and Citizenship as one of seven demonstration projects nationwide funded by the federal Commission on National and Community Service.

By partnering with local nonprofit agencies, Volunteer Maryland develops volunteer programs that meet a community’s critical needs in education, human services, public safety, or the environment. Since 1995, Volunteer Maryland has been an AmeriCorps program which, in partnership with local agencies, recruits and trains full-time Volunteer Maryland coordinators to serve in their communities as volunteer managers for one year.

Besides the one-year AmeriCorps program, Volunteer Maryland also conducts on-site training and provides technical assistance for State agencies and community partners. Education and outreach on volunteerism and national service throughout Maryland and the national AmeriCorps network are another responsibility of Volunteer Maryland.

The state estimated that in 2001, nearly 2 million people from Maryland volunteered their time in community service. Our residents, our environment, and our children have benefited from the self-giving donations, but our economy has profited as well. An hour of work donated by a volunteer is estimated to be worth $16.54. With 2 million Marylanders volunteering an average of 6 and a half hours per month, the value added to our state's economy is more than $2 billion.

It goes without saying that volunteers provide a critical service to our state and our country. We take this week to express our gratitude to those who sacrifice their personal time for the good of others, but we also send out a call for action to mobilize all Marylanders to join the volunteer corps and to share your talents.

You can help improve the quality of life in Maryland by choosing from a wide variety of organizations in need of help. I have compiled a list of venues where you can find opportunities to volunteer on my website, located at www.hoyer.house.gov, and I encourage you to locate an organization, non-profit, or individual that could use your help. Whether you have an hour to give or a whole year, the opportunities to give of your time are endless.

Sargent Shriver was known to say, “serve, serve, serve, because in the end it is the servants who save us all.” I hope you will join me in recognizing one of the driving forces of our nation, the compassion of its citizens and their willingness to share their talents, while at the same time pledging to join our state’s honorable legacy by answering the call to service.