

Obama picks Oregon Nike executive to lead volunteer programs

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Associated PressMaria Eitel

President Barack Obama on Tuesday nominated a Nike executive to lead the nation's community service programs, which will swell under a bill he signed hours later.

Maria Eitel, president of the Nike Foundation, will become chief executive officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service if she is approved by the U.S. Senate. Under the new legislation, she'll get an infusion of \$5.7 billion to triple the scope of AmeriCorps, expand opportunities to earn college grants and otherwise re-imagine volunteerism.

At a bill signing ceremony, Obama called for a new era of national service -- a theme he echoed often during his presidential campaign. He introduced Eitel as the ideal person to guide that transformation.

"Maria is a smart and innovative thinker, and a leader who shares my belief in the power of service," Obama said.

For many in Oregon, Eitel's appointment spotlights the state's spirit of volunteerism and its largest company, while providing an important link to Washington, D.C.

As a Nike vice president, Eitel has steered the charitable arm of the Beaverton-area sportswear giant since 2004. Under her leadership, the foundation reinvented itself to focus on helping disadvantaged girls.

Eitel, who could not be reached Tuesday, said in 2005 that she wanted to maximize the power of Nike's contributions.

"There's so much need, and if you're just responsive to every small issue, you can't really have the impact you're looking for," said Eitel, who grew up in Everett, Wash., and keeps a home base in Seattle.

In several years, the foundation doubled its annual reach to more than \$10 million, says foundation spokeswoman Ilana Finley. She attributes much of that growth to Eitel's passion, intelligence and drive.

Eitel will remain at Nike until she is confirmed by the Senate, Finley says, and help figure out a process to find her replacement. Colleagues are thrilled by Tuesday's news, Finley says, but still a little shocked -- the Obama administration first contacted Eitel about a week ago.

"The nomination is a reflection on what she's done with the foundation, and the work the foundation has done to support girls," Finley says.

Eitel previously served as the company's first vice president of corporate responsibility, which put her at the center of controversy over labor practices. Although work conditions remain an issue in the sneaker industry, Nike's reputation has improved over the past decade.

Before joining Nike, Eitel worked at Microsoft and served on the White House media staff under President George H.W. Bush from 1989 to 1992.

On Tuesday, Obama praised Eitel's combination of "bold vision and responsible management experience."

The president has made community service a hallmark of his first months in office, touting bipartisan support for the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. His audience Tuesday included political stars such as Sen. Ted Kennedy, the bill's namesake, and former President Bill Clinton, who created AmeriCorps.

AmeriCorps volunteers earn a stipend during 10- to 12-month stints with nonprofits, public agencies and community groups. Under the bill, the program will grow from 75,000 positions today to 250,000 by 2017. Meanwhile, new service corps will focus on education, health care, clean energy and veteran services. And programs for senior citizens will expand.

At the helm of all this work: the Corporation for National and Community Service, which was created in 1993. The corporation also promotes volunteerism and studies trends.

One-third of Oregonians donate time, the corporation estimates, compared with 27 percent nationally. And the Portland metro area ranks third in the country, at 36 percent.

Those numbers -- combined with Obama's service push -- are good news for Oregon, says Kathleen Joy, who leads the state commission that oversees AmeriCorps and encourages service. Three people apply for each of Oregon's 872 AmeriCorps spots.

The commission will prepare for new work in the coming months. And as far as Joy is concerned, having a Northwest leader at the helm is terrific.

"Because she comes from that environment where service and engagement are really part of who we are," Joy says, "that's going to reflect on the way she looks at the work she's about to do."

Oregonians are more eager than ever to help their communities, says Andy Nelson, executive director of Hands On Greater Portland. The group, which pairs volunteers with projects, doubled the size of its annual Martin Luther King Jr. service day in January. And last month, Hands On marshaled a record 1,200 volunteers.

Oregonians who are out of work stay connected and energized by volunteering, Nelson says. And the president's call to service makes a difference.

"Service is resonating in a way we haven't seen since World War II," Nelson says.

He's also seen companies -- including Nike -- step up as volunteer leaders. Hands On has partnered with Nike on employee service days and a program that matches reading tutors with area schools.

Eitel's nomination should make Oregonians proud, Nelson says.

"We have this great history of volunteerism; I think a lot of people move here because of that," he says. "It feels very validating to have one of our local leaders selected for this national position."

--Laura Oppenheimer; loppenheimer@news.oregonian.com

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Maria S. Eitel

Nomination: chief executive officer, Corporation for National and Community Service

Age: 46

Current job: President, Nike Foundation; vice president, Nike

Experience: Vice president of corporate responsibility, Nike; manager of corporate, public and community affairs, European region, Microsoft; Corporation for Public Broadcasting; MCI Communications Corp.; White House deputy director of media relations, special assistant to President George H.W. Bush for media affairs

Service: World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on HIV/AIDS; board of directors, Millennium Promise; Stanford Graduate School of Business Advisory Council; board of trustees, Lakeside School in Seattle

Education: B.S., McGill University; M.S., Georgetown University; Stanford Graduate School of Business executive program.

Volunteer programs

What: Corporation for National and Community Service

Founded: 1993

Oversees: AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, Learn and Serve America

Other duties: Promote and track volunteerism

Budget: \$889.9 million, fiscal 2009

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