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VIRGINIA WEATHERS THE STORM

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The storm raging in Washington over decreased funding for America's premier community service program, AmeriCorps, threatens to dampen the spirit, quality, and quantity of service in the Commonwealth. Over the past decade participants in AmeriCorps, commonly referred to as the "domestic Peace Corps," have made genuine and enduring changes in the lives of countless Virginians. Yet its future is cloudy, at best.

AmeriCorps members have mentored thousands of Virginia's children, mobilized hundreds of community volunteers to clean up neighborhoods, responded to floods and other natural disasters, provided employment services, child and elder care, and have significantly contributed to the overall strength and security of our communities. Last year, AmeriCorps members tutored 1,100 elementary school students. They removed 48,000 pounds of trash from Virginia's parks. More than 50 Virginia families live in homes built by AmeriCorps' Habitat for Humanity and its partners.

AmeriCorps members are compensated with a modest living stipend (as little as \$9,000) and an educational award (slightly more than \$4,000) for a year of full-time, intensive, hands-on service in our most needy communities. Towns, cities, and citizens in Virginia, and throughout the nation, have enjoyed a high return on this relatively small investment. It is no wonder that President Bush and the First Lady frequently praise AmeriCorps for "bringing help and hope to people in communities across the country."

THE PRESIDENT bravely crossed a partisan divide that had long plagued the initiative by announcing in his first State of the Union Address, and repeating in numerous speeches thereafter, that he sought to increase AmeriCorps membership by 50 percent, from 50,000 to 75,000. The program's opponents, long motivated by its association with President Bill Clinton, were given added ammunition when financial mismanagement by the federal agency that runs AmeriCorps came to light in recent months. Instead of answering President Bush's post-9/11 call to strengthen our democracy by promoting national service, the opponents have advanced a "cap-and-cut" approach, limiting AmeriCorps enrollment to 50,000 and slashing the budget by 30 percent. In 2003, AmeriCorps stands to lose half of the slots for which many willing Americans have already interviewed. Throughout the country, hundreds of community service programs are now shutting down as a result.

There is some good news for Virginians. Under Governor Warner's direction, the state commission charged with overseeing AmeriCorps anticipated possible cutbacks and prepared to weather the storm in a way that minimizes the impact on our state programs. While some states will eliminate support for as many as 80 percent of their service initiatives, Virginia's 11 AmeriCorps programs will continue, and the number of AmeriCorps members serving Virginia

will actually increase next year. However, we must not become complacent in light of the Commonwealth's temporary good fortune. Virginians who have witnessed the excellent work of AmeriCorps members must voice their support to our federal representatives, lest the storm that is devastating community service programs in the rest of the country today bear down on Virginia tomorrow.

THE VIRGINIA Commission on National and Community Service is calling on Virginia's federal lawmakers to take a leadership role in three ways: (1) Ask the President to submit a supplemental funding request to return AmeriCorps enrollment to 50,000 members in 2003; (2) support the President's "Citizens Service Act" that will increase enrollment by 50 percent in 2004; and (3) demand greater accountability from the federal agency that oversees the initiative.

The challenge of sustaining the health and prosperity of our people and the ideas and values of our Republic has never been greater. The AmeriCorps program, along with the Peace Corps, Senior Corps, Learn and Serve, and the USA Freedom Corps have become invaluable assets in that struggle. With a decade-long track record of success, AmeriCorps has earned a right not just to survive but to thrive.

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