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Nomadic Workers Converge for Virginia's Busy Election Season

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With two weeks until Election Day, **Greg Werkheiser's** tidy Springfield home resembles a youth hostel.

Visitors check in, wander past the shared kitchen and meet up in the basement, where they pick up maps and head out to comb southern Fairfax County neighborhoods, dropping literature and knocking on doors on behalf of the Virginia House of Delegates candidate. Some drive home at the end of the day; others get a key and stay awhile.

Because Virginia has one of the two statewide elections this year, there's a spotlight on the handful of competitive races for the House and a down-to-the-wire dead heat for the governor's seat.

For the nomadic tribe of campaign workers who travel from race to race, all roads lead to Virginia, where election outcomes could be a bellwether for the nation, or where they can at least stave off unemployment or a 9-to-5 job. The state is crowded with out-of-towners working 18-hour days, talking about easing traffic and securing school funding for Virginians.

"Because we're one of the only games in town, we have our choice of excellent staff," Werkheiser said. "The cream of the crop come calling in Virginia."

The Democratic candidate is running in a swing district that voted for Democrat John F. Kerry in November's presidential election, and many party activists have been eager to support somebody who they think can unseat Republican Del. David B. Albo (Fairfax). During his search for a campaign manager last winter, Werkheiser said, he received so many résumés that he began forwarding them to a screener from the Virginia Democratic Party.

He eventually decided on Bergen Kenny, a 27-year-old San Francisco native with a long political track record. She interned with Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) in Washington, worked as a field organizer for Richard A. Gephardt in Iowa and Wesley K. Clark in South Carolina and Oklahoma during their presidential campaigns, and managed state senate races last year in Iowa.

Kenny now occupies an upstairs bedroom at Werkheiser's house, where she begins her workday checking e-mail from bed. She shares a bathroom with another live-in volunteer from Manassas and Werkheiser, whose wife, Marion, booted him from the master bathroom for the duration of the campaign so she can have one room to herself.

Zeke Hill, 22, an Ohio native and recent graduate of Cornell University, arrived at the end of August as an "in-kind donation" from Emily's List, a political action committee. But there were no rooms left at the Werkheiser residence, so he moved into the basement of the next-door neighbor's house.

"I don't have too much time to do laundry -- or clean," Hill said sheepishly, his open closet door revealing a pile of wadded up pants and T-shirts competing for space with blue-and-red yard signs. "I usually just run over here in the middle of the night and sleep."

Neither major party wants to be stigmatized as relying on carpetbaggers or outsiders to run their campaigns, and both stress that the lion's share of the work to elect Virginia's officials is done by Virginians. But the practice of crossing state lines to further a political agenda is commonplace, regardless of party.

Matt Klemin, who is running Republican Michael J. Golden's campaign in another close Fairfax race, is from Sacramento. He said he gained most of his political experience in San Diego. Casey Phillips, campaign manager for Anne B. Crockett-Stark's race in southwestern Virginia, has worked on congressional races in Texas, Louisiana and Virginia, as well as a gubernatorial race in his native South Dakota.

"I've been living out of my jeep for the past two years," he said.

In addition to having dibs on experienced campaign staff, there are other benefits of working an off-year election, said Randy Marcus, manager of Republican state Sen. Bill Bolling's bid for lieutenant governor. The campaign was able to hire a nationally reputable media consultant for a good price, he said, and he is enjoying daily phone calls from the Republican National Committee, which would be unlikely attention if 30 other races were going on.

Most national fundraising and grass-roots efforts from both parties are focused on the gubernatorial campaign, and the migration to Virginia is expected to intensify as troops file in during the last days to get voters to the polls.

Werkheiser plans on a full house of volunteers leading up to the Nov. 8 election and has invested campaign money in 20 air mattresses to fill every available inch of floor space.

Ask his campaign manager what her next stop will be once the mattresses are deflated and the house empties out, and she shrugs. She points to a number posted on the wall and the only future she says she can see right now: the number of days until the election.

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