DANUTA OTFINOWSKI, FOR THE CHRONICLE

Amity Tripp, executive director of AmeriCorps Alums, says she hopes that Congress will find ways to recruit graduates of federal national-service programs to form a reserve corps that can be deployed whenever a disaster strikes. "They work hard," she says.

AmeriCorps' Big Future

Supporters of volunteer programs seek major expansion in 2009

By Cassie J. Moore

Philanthropy & Politics

ON SEPTEMBER 11, Sens. John McCain and Barack Obama will appear at a gathering of charity leaders in New York to talk about one issue they more or less agree on: national service. Both are expected to call for a vast expansion of the federal government's domestic and international service programs.

The appearance by the Republican and Democratic presidential nominees so close to Election Day signals a major coup for ServiceNation.

The coalition of more than 100 corporations and nonprofit groups that organized the two-day meeting—with $500,000 from the Carnegie Corporation of New York—hopes the candidates will mark the seventh anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks with a rallying cry for Americans to give more time to charitable causes.

Senator Obama has already said he would more than triple enrollment in AmeriCorps, the federal service program, from 75,000 to 250,000 participants, by 2012. He would also double the Peace Corps to 16,000 members.

Senator McCain has yet to provide details of his plan, but sources close to him say he will do so at the New York event.

The plans by the presidential candidates will probably get a lift in Congress from key lawmakers. Sens. Orrin Hatch, Republican of Utah, and Ted Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, are expected to unveil legislation at the New York meeting that would expand national-service programs and raise the amount of the education award that full-time AmeriCorps participants receive, which is now $4,725 for a year of service—the same amount approved when Congress first passed AmeriCorps 15 years ago.

Seeking Baby Boomers

Supporters of a much-expanded service program say the federal government should encourage young people and baby boomers, in particular, to devote a year or two of their lives to such activities as teaching, assisting after a disaster, or protecting the environment. They say interest already exceeds the current capacity: For every available spot in AmeriCorps, three people apply, according to federal statistics. But whether a huge increase in participation in national-service programs is practical or possible remains to be seen.

Ever since the program was started, politicians

Continued on Page 10

Advocates Seek to Expand National-Service Programs

Continued from Page 7

and nonprofit leaders have debated how effective federal service programs can be at either solving social problems or instilling a lasting sense of civic duty among participants.

And finding new money to finance an expansion will prove a hard sell as the federal deficit swells. Senator Obama's national-service plan, for example, would cost about $3.5-billion per year, which he says he would pay for by eliminating tax breaks for international corporations and by ending the war in Iraq. Costs for Senator McCain's national-service plan are unclear.

Some observers also question whether the Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees AmeriCorps and other service programs, is prepared for rapid growth. They say the agency—which has suffered budget cuts every year since 2004 and closed its national recruitment office in 2004—has been slow to adopt new technology that could help recruit members. AmeriCorps also is not very well known, so that may make it hard for the agency to lead a major recruitment campaign.

Survival Threats

AmeriCorps was created by President Bill Clinton and passed as part of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. Under the law, federal money flows to nonprofit groups like Teach for America and Habitat for Humanity to put AmeriCorps members to work, and charities must match some of the money. AmeriCorps participants receive a stipend as well as money they can apply toward college.

"The boomer generation doesn't want to retire the way their parents did. They're healthier, they're living longer, . . . and they want to give back."

AmeriCorps has faced Congressional threats to eliminate its funds numerous times over the years.

But Paul Schmitz, chief executive officer of Public Allies, a charity in Milwaukee that trains young people for public-service jobs, says he believes the climate in Washington has started to shift, with support for AmeriCorps growing as it becomes better established and a better advocate for its achievements.

The Corporation for National and Community Service has commissioned studies to demonstrate to the public that its participants are making a difference. This spring, for example, it released a report that said former AmeriCorps members are more likely than their peers to take nonprofit or government jobs. AmeriCorps, the corporation says, can serve as a "pipeline to public service."

And many of the people who have served in AmeriCorps over the past 15 years have been mobilized to demonstrate their support for expansion of the program, both through ServiceNation and AmeriCorps Alums, a network of about 20,000 graduates of the program.

"National service for the first time is on offense," says Mr. Schmitz. "For years, we played defense. For years, there were critics and those out to get it and attempts to kill it. And those failed."

Even with the intensified efforts to attract support, persuading Congress to vote for an expansion plan will be far from a sure thing.

Paul Light, professor of public service at New York University, says that while he supports expansion efforts, in the past it's been "an elusive goal that everybody seems to embrace, but nobody seems to want to fund."

"It's really going to be a tough sell to Congress," he says. "There are die-hard opponents of AmeriCorps on Capitol Hill, several in the Senate. I'm not sure we're going to have the 60 votes necessary [in the Senate] to expand."

One difference now, as opposed to previous years, is that politicians—and the general public—have started to think less in terms of "service for service's sake" and instead see volunteerism as "what we need to solve our core problems" as a country, says David Eisner, head of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

To give national service more prominence, the agency that oversees it should be elevated in stature, with a leader who serves in the president's cabinet, says JoAnn Jastrzab, a researcher at Abt Associates, in Cambridge, Mass., which has prepared studies of the program commissioned by the Corporation for National and Community Service since 1993. She also says that other government agencies, such as the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development, could work more closely with AmeriCorps to encourage their grant recipients to rely on service members to carry out their programs.

For example, she says, grant recipients of the housing department could use AmeriCorps members to recruit volunteers to help repair public housing or run literacy programs in housing developments.

Recruiting Older Americans

If Congress does approve a bigger budget for national service in the future, advocates hope to fill new slots by persuading baby boomers to devote some of their retirement years to service, as well as attracting young people in the millennial generation, the estimated 78 million people born from 1979 to 2001.

"This boomer generation doesn't want to retire the way their parents did," says Alan Khazei, who founded City Year in 1988, which served as a model for the federal program. "They're healthier, they're living longer, a lot of them grew up in the '60s, which was a very idealistic time, and they want to give back."

At the ServiceNation event, Civic Enterprises, a public-policy consulting firm in Washington, will release a report commissioned by the AARP with recommendations for attracting baby boomers and older Americans, says John Bridgeland, chief executive of Civic Enterprises.

He says one possibility would be to provide a "silver scholarship," or a transferrable education award that older Americans could pass on to their children or grandchildren. Currently, the AmeriCorps education award is nontransferrable.

To attract more young people, ServiceNation promotes volunteerism on several popular social-networking sites.

But the Corporation for National and Community Service lags behind other organizations in its use of new technology, some observers say. They note that AmeriCorps's online recruitment site, for example, is confusing, outdated, and unlikely to appeal to a generation accustomed to filling out job applications online.

AmeriCorps officials agree that improvements are needed. The agency is taking steps to update its Web site, including adding a social-networking feature.

Seeking Visibility

Supporters say the next step for AmeriCorps is to give the program more visibility, and better demonstrate what it has accomplished.

That is tricky because AmeriCorps participants tend to identify more strongly with the charities at which they were placed than with the AmeriCorps program, says Mr. Eisner. For example, AmeriCorps members at Teach for America think of themselves as teachers.

Mr. Eisner says the corporation used to encourage this approach, seeing its role as a behind-the-scenes broker. But the agency now realizes that it needs to do more to build public support.

"The hard part has been telling a coherent national story about the impact of national service, and I think that's a real opportunity for the field going forward," says AnnMaura Connolly, senior vice president of global initiatives and strategic partnerships at City Year.

Ms. Connolly says the next step will be to show that AmeriCorps members have made a significant difference on a few select national issues, such as lowering the high-school-dropout rate. The results of the narrowed focus would motivate more Americans to join AmeriCorps, familiarize the public with the volunteer corps, and prompt more political support.

"If we were able to choose some big national goals, I think that would be both very motivating for citizens" and, she says, "it will enable us at the end of the day to say this policy idea has real legs and can really address the issues."

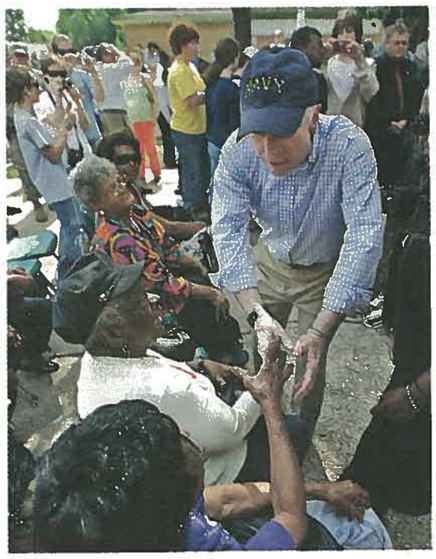
She says an expanded AmeriCorps could be especially effective in helping after major disasters.

"National service was one of the best stories of that whole horrible era after [Hurricane] Katrina," Ms. Connolly says. "National service has been on the ground since the day after the storm hit and remains there today in the recovery and the rebuilding process."

As of this month, 12,000 AmeriCorps members have served in the Gulf Coast, spending a total of 4.2 million hours working on relief projects. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, those members have helped coordinate the work of 368,000 additional volunteers.

Amity Tripp, executive director of AmeriCorps Alums, says she would like to establish a "reserve corps" of alumni who could be dispatched for disaster relief. "There are so many good AmeriCorps alums that are aleady trained" in disaster-recovery work, she says. "They work hard, they get the team-based approach, and a lot of our alumni are interested in being in a reserve corps already before we've even tried to start one."

Does national service make a difference? Opinion: Page 32.



JOHN MCCAIN, IN NEW ORLEANS — MARY ALTAFFER/AP IMAGES

BARACK OBAMA, IN QUINCY, ILL. — SETH PERLMAN/AP IMAGES

Volunteerism: Where the Candidates Stand

Both presidential candidates from the two major political parties plan to promote national service when they speak at the ServiceNation Summit September 11.

Sen. John McCain, the presumptive Republican nominee, has yet to propose a specific plan on national service but is expected to do so at the meeting. In the past, he has introduced legislation to increase participation in the federal AmeriCorps service program to 250,000. It currently has about 75,000 participants.

Key elements of the plan promoted by Sen. Barack Obama, the Democratic nominee, include:

- Expanding AmeriCorps to 250,000 slots and doubling the size of the Peace Corps to 16,000.
- Recruiting additional volunteers to establish five new groups: Classroom Corps, Health Corps, Clean Energy Corps, Veterans Corps, and Homeland Security Corps.
- Increasing service opportunities at colleges by giving students money for college tuition if they complete 100 hours of service per year, and increasing the number of work-study options with a service focus, such as tutoring.
- Paying for the estimated $3.5-billion per year to expand federal service programs by eliminating tax breaks for international corporations and by ending the war in Iraq. —CASSIE J. MOORE