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Support Backbone of National Service

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National service should be a rite of passage for all citizens, especially since 9/11. And this required service should include non-combat options like AmeriCorps and the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) for those who do not enlist in the military.

The NCCC is a blend of military structure and civilian initiative. Authorized and signed into law in 1990 by President George H.W. Bush with bipartisan sponsorship.

NCCC teams work with local and state governments and for nonprofit and faith-based organizations in every state. NCCC recruits young adults— American citizens— and molds them into enthusiastic, hardworking teams that are prescreened, well-trained and well-led.

These teams deploy rapidly and have provided relief and recovery services for every major U.S. disaster since 1994. Currently, some 2,000 18- to 24-years olds receive room and board, a modest living stipend of \$13 a day, health coverage and, after leaving the corps, a taxable \$4,725 education award.

As U.S. Sen. John McCain put it, the NCCC is a "24/7 experience that fosters group cohesion and a sense of mission. NCCC members know they are part of a national effort to serve their country. The communities they serve know that too."

Speaking a few weeks ago, from the Senate floor, Democratic Sens. Barbara Mikulski and Robert Byrd emphatically praised the program, its participants, and its extraordinary value to our nation. Republican Sen. Thad Cochran said: "There have been more than 1,600 National Civilian Community Corps members in my state of Mississippi since the day after Hurricane Katrina struck our coast. They remain available at a moment's notice for deployment to any emergency in the country."

In light of the above, a robust and enduring U.S. domestic national service capacity should be considered indispensable. Yet, this is precisely the time that Congress is being asked to eliminate the NCCC, the "backbone" of our national service infrastructure.

Today, some House and Senate conferees in Washington are doing their "best" to end NCCC's unfinished work in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Alabama. Recovery from the worst natural disaster in our nation's history is nowhere near complete. And it is predicted that another exceptionally strong and active hurricane season will be upon us soon.

Given U.S. and allied security concerns in the war against terrorism and our commitment to diplomacy and humanitarian assistance (such as tsunami and earthquake relief), we cannot easily or safely recall all military personnel and retreat within our borders.

Today, our reserve components are overstretched by unprecedented and repeated mobilization for duty in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as hurricane relief on the Gulf Coast.

Many of these fine men and women are also law enforcement personnel and others whose needed skills make them "first responders" in the event of a major crisis at home.

All this at the same time when guarding our borders has become a new national mission. President Bush announced in mid-May that National Guard troops are to be deployed to the Mexican border as a part of a national effort to curb illegal immigration. This, to say the least, has not been well received by the National Guard.

Yet, no public figure has yet thought to expand NCCC's role. What better form of national service than to expand NCCC to include monitoring our national borders?

In a few months, NCCC may be forced to cease operations permanently— as called for in the President's proposed FY 2007 budget. Whether responsible officials are unaware of NCCC's true value or blinded by ideology, the termination of NCCC runs counter to vital private, local, state, and national interests.

When NCCC teams are not fighting fires, responding to ice storms, hurricanes, or floods, they are providing grateful communities with high-energy assistance in environmental, educational, and public health projects, helping to tutor children, working on behalf of our elderly and people with disabilities, coordinating other volunteers, building and rebuilding homes while gaining knowledge and stamina for future disaster relief.

As a high-performing but relatively small part of the successful AmeriCorps family of programs, NCCC has been attacked on the basis of its cost per member. This measurement is overshadowed by the evident far-reaching cost-effectiveness of the program; the national interests served in providing arduous leadership opportunities, training, and experience; and the catastrophic tangible and intangible costs of failing to respond to disasters and protect property and lives. An expanded NCCC, moreover, would be ideal for monitoring our border, thus relieving the National Guard of an unwanted duty.

AmeriCorps and the National Civilian Community Corps deserve the support of the public and its representatives in Congress.

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