

# AmeriCorps—A Community Resource Available Statewide

By AMANDA S. HEALY

What could be accomplished in your community with at least 10 additional pairs of hands, dedicated to one project, for 12 months? What compelling community need could be met?

This is the question that Fran Inge, Director of the Division of Community and Volunteerism Services, asks of leaders across the Commonwealth of Virginia. When local governments and non-profits identify projects and programs that need to be planned, implemented or expanded, Inge is quick to suggest that AmeriCorps be considered.

In Virginia, AmeriCorps is managed through the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS). As the Virginia Service Commission, VDSS accesses AmeriCorps funding from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), and then makes it available to meet community needs. AmeriCorps focuses on education, economic opportunity, services to veterans and military families, healthy futures, environmental stewardship, and disaster readiness and recovery. Funding for special initiatives is occasionally made available, as well. Examples include programming to recruit and train volunteers, and programming designed specifically to help veterans complete educational or vocational training using their GI benefits. Virginia's current portfolio of AmeriCorps State programs includes educational programming from pre-K through high school and beyond, financial literacy training, anti-hunger support, job readiness training, and trail maintenance on public lands.

Inge is quick to point out the multi-level benefits of AmeriCorps programming.

"First, there is the community benefit—the school children who are tutored or mentored, the veterans who fully utilize the benefits to which they are entitled, the households with additional income because individuals completed training programs. We (the Virginia Service Commission) also expect

our host organizations to ramp up their volunteer recruitment and management efforts, so the community also has the benefit of new, trained and engaged volunteers. Second, there is a benefit to the host organization, whether public or private. The host organization gains valuable experience in managing a federal grant, and in overseeing a program requiring high accountability with very specific, ambitious outcomes. The third level of benefit is to the AmeriCorps members themselves. They gain valuable leadership and work experience, make great contacts and join a nationwide cadre of national service participants. Moreover, upon completion of their terms of service, AmeriCorps members have an educational award made available to them (or their children or grandchildren) to put toward existing student debt or for future educational or vocational training."

In addition to AmeriCorps, which is high impact, long-term direct service, with relatively low cost to the host organization, CNCS offers other national service programs. AmeriCorps VISTA is another high impact, long-term, and low cost anti-poverty program supporting organizational capacity building and indirect service. The National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) is geared toward direct or indirect service through high impact, short-term and low cost projects. CNCS also sponsors Senior Corps, which uses the skills and talents of older citizens in Foster Grandparents and in Retired Senior Volunteer Program.

Inge urges anyone interested in finding a solution to unmet community needs to visit [www.vaservice.org](http://www.vaservice.org), or call (804) 726-7065. "The needs of your community," says Inge, "may be met by AmeriCorps and national service."

*Amanda S. Healy is the AmeriCorps Program Manager for the Office on Volunteerism and Community Service in the Virginia Department of Social Services.*

## Nomination Reform 2016

By STEPHEN J. FARNSWORTH

As Virginia's deeply divided political culture embarks on another year of frustration and gridlock, I'd suggest lawmakers spend some time on a matter nearly all Virginians can agree on: breaking the insane tyranny of Iowa and New Hampshire over the presidential nomination process.

Granting these two small and unrepresentative states disproportionate influence year after year has never made any sense for either political party. Furthermore, it's bad for Virginia and for the other 47 states basically forced to consider as potential presidents only the top two or three finishers who have performed best in Iowa and New Hampshire.

Virginia shouldn't have to act alone. A number of other larger states, particularly Michigan and Florida, have chafed at the outsized influence of those two breathtakingly unrepresentative jurisdictions. The Old Dominion can and should take the lead in breaking a system that unfairly advantages two small states deserving no such advantages.

The fact-based case for Virginia's first-ness is wide-ranging. First of all, the state is far closer to America in miniature than those two places—or, for that matter, Nevada or South Carolina, two other highly favored states on the presidential nomination calendar.

Virginia has its ideologically liberal northeast and a replica of Silicon Valley in Northern Virginia. The Commonwealth has its



own Sun Coast and an industrial heartland in Hampton Roads, and a variety of politically and culturally distinct urban and suburban communities along I-95, I-66, I-81 and I-64. Many other regions of the state are populated by farming communities and small towns that call to mind the Great Plains or the South. It has substantial numbers of Christian conservative voters and Tea Party supporters as well.

But there's more. Population statistics demonstrate the demographic advantages of the Old Dominion over the first two nomination states. Virginia's population is about 69 percent white, as compared to more than 90 percent of the residents of those two politically favored states. (The national population is about 72 percent white). In presidential elections, Virginia routinely comes very close to the national division of votes.

To make the case even stronger, many of today's Virginia voters came here from somewhere else, and many of them are active-duty or retired military families. They add an unusual regional diversity to the state electorate—another reason why the Old Dominion deserves to be at or near the head of the line. Other states can and should make similar cases.

Iowa and N.H. try to sell the rest of the nation on the idea that they represent that last vestiges of Norman Rockwell's America, where deliberate, sober voters offer an allegedly grateful nation their carefully considered preferences. In fact, the current process is more Norman Bates than Norman Rockwell. Iowa often favors an extreme candidate and N.H. generally turns to a well-funded, media-friendly candidate. (Plus Iowa demonstrated in 2012 that it

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can't count, first claiming that Mitt Romney won and then correcting the record to name Rick Santorum as the winner.)

Why should these two small states have such outsized influence every time? Consider this: the 122,000 votes cast in the 2012 Iowa GOP caucus is less than the number of votes cast in the race to lead the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors in November 2011. The votes cast for that one Fairfax race, plus those for two other contests that year—Henrico County Sheriff and Stafford County Commonwealth's Attorney—exceeded the 249,000 votes cast in the N.H. Republican Primary. (In 2012, President Barack Obama was effectively unopposed for re-nomination so there was negligible interest on the Democratic side).

Playing by rules that favor far less representative states gets Virginia and other more representative states nowhere. Last time, the Old Dominion was one of 11 states voting on March 6, and it received little attention in that mad rush. Indeed, the GOP candidates demonstrated their indifference to the state during the ballot qualification process—despite the huge field that descended on Iowa and New Hampshire four years ago only Mitt Romney and Ron Paul bothered to collect enough valid signatures to end up on the primary ballot.

N.H. and Iowa will not allow this twisted process to end without a fight, and that's why Virginia can't work alone. Ideally, Virginia could take the lead in creating a multi-state coalition to end the undeserved special status of those first two states. Politicians in a variety of cash-strapped states would likely see the appeal of taking turns hosting the candidates and the media if such a movement got going. (A group of states cannot be easily ignored or punished, particularly when they work together).

With Virginia helping create a "Nomination Spring" reform, the U.S. could move to a primary schedule determined by lottery or a regional primary system that would give at least one of the 48 states not named N.H. or Iowa a chance—for once—to vote on a full candidate field.

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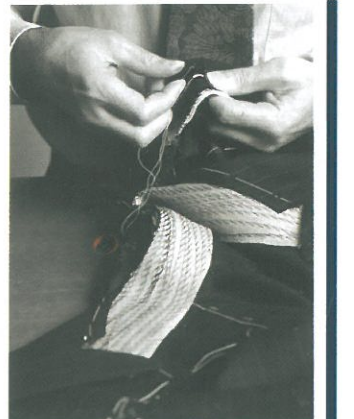
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