

Clinton Continues to Favor AmeriCorps National-Service Program

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WASHINGTON
PRESIDENT Clinton has once again proposed a major budget increase for his prized AmeriCorps national-service program, charting a course to bolster the beleaguered program after he leaves office.

Under a plan he released last week for the 2001 fiscal year, AmeriCorps would receive a 19-percent increase, for a total of \$563.3-million, enough to finance 62,000 participants. The program gives each participant a \$4,725 voucher to help cover college expenses or pay back student loans, in exchange for a year of full-time community service within the United States.

The president aims to put AmeriCorps on a path to enlisting a total of 100,000 participants each year by 2004. This year, about 50,000 people are expected to serve in the program.

Mr. Clinton's plan also proposes \$5-million to create an AmeriCorps Reserves

program. That would allow former AmeriCorps members to engage in community service, after work or on weekends, when natural disasters or other crises strike.

Last month, when he first announced his national-service plan, the president noted that more than 150,000 people had served in AmeriCorps since he signed the legislation creating the program in 1993. Those participants, the president argued, "represent our very best ideals."

REPUBLICAN RESISTANCE

Mr. Clinton's request, though, is likely to encounter resistance in Congress. Many Republican lawmakers continue to oppose AmeriCorps. Last year, the House of Representatives voted to eliminate the bulk of federal funds for the national-service program, as lawmakers had done before. But appropriators agreed to restore a total of \$473.3-million for AmeriCorps during budget negotiations with senators. That

was \$111.7-million less than President Clinton's request for the 2000 fiscal year.

Officials at the Corporation for National Service—the umbrella organization that oversees AmeriCorps—also have had to battle several weaknesses that auditors identified in the agency's financial management. Last year, oversight panels in Congress held hearings in which some lawmakers sharply criticized the agency for failing to correct problems more quickly.

And now, given that President Clinton will soon leave office, AmeriCorps officials face the loss of one of their most ardent defenders in federal-budget battles.

Nevertheless, the officials said they remained confident that the national-service program had turned a corner. They pointed out that several high-profile Republicans who had once opposed AmeriCorps—such as Rep. John R. Kasich of Ohio, chairman of the House Budget Committee—now vigorously endorsed it. Sen. John McCain,

the Arizona Republican who is running for president, recently said that he had erred when he voted against the AmeriCorps program in the past.

"The degree of bipartisan support has grown, and each of the major presidential candidates has said they supported national service" as a general concept, said Harris Wofford, the corporation's chief executive officer. "National service in all its forms, I think, will thrive in any of the administrations currently being offered us."

As for Congress, Mr. Wofford said he was optimistic that AmeriCorps would win a substantial increase during the new budget season.

In an election year, "there is a good chance that both parties will want to do things that reflect a common ground," Mr. Wofford said. "National service is a common ground, and I am optimistic that common sense will prevail." ■