

MAUREEN CURLEY AND ERIC SCHWARZ

The Boston Globe

## A Mass. call to service

By Maureen Curley and Eric Schwarz | April 12, 2007

GOVERNOR Deval Patrick has begun to write a new chapter for citizen service in Massachusetts. By calling for a Commonwealth Corps that will grow to 1,000 full- and part-time volunteers, he offers Massachusetts residents new opportunities to serve and to embrace the service of others.

The central idea of the Commonwealth Corps is leverage. In a time of constrained resources, the Commonwealth Corps will tap a deep reservoir of talent and idealism to tackle pressing priorities in our communities. Members of the Commonwealth Corps will provide direct service -- teaching in after-school programs, mentoring disadvantaged youth, helping the elderly live independently, and supporting public health priorities. In addition, Commonwealth Corps members will also recruit and mobilize tens of thousands of additional volunteers from communities large and small to meet urgent challenges and to revitalize our civic spirit.

Massachusetts is home to many outstanding volunteer programs that employ different models of service. For example, Jumpstart partners with colleges and universities to engage students in one-on-one relationships with 3-year-olds in Head Start centers to prepare them for kindergarten. Generations Incorporated recruits both young and older adults to work in schools and nursing homes. Citizen Schools engages professionals and trades people to teach apprenticeships in the after-school hours. The Commonwealth Corps will build on these and other proven models and strong organizations and also ignite innovation to try new ideas and involve additional organizations.

Many Commonwealth Corps members will work to address high-profile statewide issues. In 2006, 11,000 10th-graders scored below the passing level on the MCAS exam, imperiling their graduation and future success. Imagine the Commonwealth Corps recruiting tutors to work with many of these students in After-School and Expanded Learning Day programs; the Mass Mentoring Partnership reports that there are 10,000 young people in Massachusetts on waiting lists at mentoring organizations such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters. Imagine the Commonwealth Corps building on the civic spirit of the Patrick-Murray campaign and recruiting 10,000 new mentors -- people who recognize that we need more than government and private-sector initiatives to improve our lives, we need an engaged citizenry.

Other members of the Commonwealth Corps will work on locally initiated projects. For example, in Woburn, Social Capital Inc. has used a civic welcome wagon and an e-mail newsletter to welcome diverse new residents to the city, helping them access services and participate in community endeavors. School districts can use Commonwealth Corps members to launch and expand service learning initiatives in which K-12 students take their first steps along the path of service. Commonwealth Corps members can infuse local efforts such as these with talent and energy.

The Commonwealth Corps proposal builds on persistent efforts over many years by Senator Mark Pacheco and state Representative Patricia Haddad and has been encouraged by House Speaker Sal DiMasi and former Senate president Robert Travaglini. The governor's proposal, in addition to bringing service to all corners of the Commonwealth, also takes the long-overdue step of establishing the Massachusetts Service Alliance, the umbrella organization for service programs, permanently in state law.

Volunteers in the Commonwealth Corps will be students, recent college graduates, mid-career professionals, and retirees. They will earn a modest stipend and commit to a year of full-time or part-time service. They will demonstrate with skill and commitment that the solutions to many of our most urgent problems are within our grasp. They require us to re engage in civic life, to unite across traditional boundaries, and to embrace service as an obligation of citizenship and an opportunity to solve problems together.

**Maureen Curley** is the president of Campus Compact and former executive director of the Massachusetts Service Alliance. **Eric Schwarz** is president and CEO of Citizen Schools. ■