

Help Minnesota maximize tradition of public service

Minnesota has always been a leader in national service. Volunteering and giving back to the community is an ethic encouraged from childhood. Per capita the state has ranked high in sending people into the Peace Corps, VISTA and AmeriCorps programs.

During his State of the Union address, President Bush called on Americans "to commit at least two years — 4,000 hours over the rest of your lifetime — to the service of your neighbors and your nation." He proposed expanding all national service programs, including the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps and the Senior Corps.

Support for public service and civic-related programs is a nonpartisan issue. Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Evan Bayh, D-Ind., have introduced legislation to increase significantly aid for volunteer programs in line with the president's plans.

In Minnesota, Rep. Andy Dawkins, DFL-St. Paul, and Sen. Steve Kelley, DFL-Hopkins, have introduced legislation that would permit the Minnesota Commission on National and Community Service to become an independent organization, thus better able to leverage increased federal dollars to build capacity for additional public service programs, than while it remains an arm of the Department of Children, Families, and Learning.

Minnesotans are eager to respond to this latest call for increased service. As a separate entity, the commission would be better positioned to go to scale and engage the private sector in demonstrating this Minnesota commitment.

Already the commission has the

backing of former Minnesota Twins star Harmon Killebrew, who will be supporting an effort called "Serve Minnesota Challenge" to mobilize our state to respond with resources to support growth in national service for Minnesota.

Engaging the private sector on an ever-increasing scale is central to growing our volunteer programs. The commission's chairman, David Nasby of General Mills, desires that service be a model public-private venture. The government would continue to be an integral part of the commission.

Accountability would be a hallmark of the commission's work. Service would continue to "get things done" in Minnesota.

As Minnesotans we have served this cause nationally and in our community. We are proud of the state's leadership in public and national service.

The Minnesota Commission on National and Community Service has earned the necessary public-private sector support to grow service programs at a rate that meets the needs of all Minnesotans. Let's continue to be the best in service.

We applaud the legislation sponsored by Rep. Dawkins and Sen. Kelley to give the commission status as an independent organization with strong ties to government.

— *David F. Durenberger represented Minnesota in the U.S. Senate from 1978 to 1995. Jim Scheibel is executive director of Project for Pride in Living.*