

SHE AIMS TO GET MORE BLACKS RUNNING FOR POLITICAL OFFICE

By DIONNE WALKER/The Associated Press

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Krysta Jones, head of the Virginia Leadership Institute, visits the Lincoln Memorial in Washington on Friday. Jones hopes to propel more blacks into Virginia politics.

RICHMOND

The Virginia Leadership Institute will help train and mentor would-be candidates.

Virginians made history in 1989, making Douglas Wilder the first black elected a state governor.

Often forgotten, however, are the details: Wilder defeated white Republican Marshall Coleman by fewer than 7,000 votes, despite pre-election polls showing him well ahead.

That some voters might have abandoned party affiliations to block a black candidate -- and would again -- might still deter some blacks from seeking office, said Krysta Jones, a Washington-area lobbyist whose recently created Virginia Leadership Institute hopes to propel more blacks into Virginia politics.

Jones, an Arlington resident, wants to boost the number of black elected officials in the state to 500 by 2026 -- nearly doubling the current number, itself 30 years in the making.

She'll offer training to would-be black lawmakers on running an effective campaign and surviving on the political battleground, as well as overcoming their hesitation to run for office in Virginia. "We're on Capitol Hill, we are working on campaigns," said Jones, 28. "We're just not taking that final step."

From 1970 to 2001, the number of black officeholders in Virginia rose from 52 to 246, or about 64 per decade, according to the **Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies**, a Washington nonprofit that tracks black lawmakers nationwide.

It's a slow but steady increase reflected across the South.

While reconstruction saw a flood of black Southern lawmakers, the attempt at reform eventually collapsed, sending the era's last black congressman packing in 1901, said David Bositis, a political analyst with the center.

Black lawmakers reappeared by the 1940s, he said, but "in very, very tiny numbers."

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 marked a shift. By 1970, 1,469 blacks held office nationwide, according to the center. By 2000, the number was 9,040.

Numbers are highest in states such as Alabama, where in 2001, 17.2 percent of elected officials were black, according to the center's most recent data. The state is 26 percent black.

"You have Ivy League African-Americans who get an Ivy League education" and increasingly appeal to white, middle-class voters, Bositis said. Before, he said, blacks had largely attended historically black colleges emphasizing theology and agriculture over political grooming.

Meanwhile, a pool of senior black lawmakers has emerged as mentors to up-and-comers, a lifeline similar to the one that has historically helped white candidates, he said.

Yet in Virginia, where blacks comprise 19 percent of the population, they held just 7.9 percent of elected offices in 2001, according to the center. The state keeps no figures on the number of black officeholders.

In the General Assembly, blacks hold 17 of the 140 seats and virtually all represent majority-black districts. One of Virginia's 13 members of Congress, Rep. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott, D-Newport News, is black and represents a majority-black district.

Finding blacks who believe they can win is one stumbling block. Fewer than 50 attended recent forums Jones held for those interested in running.

"When we have a forum saying 'learn how to run for office' for a lot of African-Americans, that's too much of a big step," Jones said. "I just don't think we see ourselves in those positions."

Lingering fears that whites won't support them might also factor, she said.

Jones pointed to a January 2006 Yale study that estimated a black Democratic candidate on the ballot increased both black and white voter turnout by up to 3 percentage points -- blacks coming to show support, and whites to show opposition.

Jones' organization will launch a six-month candidate certification program.

Enrollees will be assigned to help with a real-life campaign and will be paired with a mentor among Virginia's black lawmakers, Jones said.

Jones has a special interest in black elected officials: She hopes to eventually become one. *