



News from the Grassroots

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Community Organizing Workshop in Southwest



Education Justice Forum in the New River Valley

43 people attended a forum in Christiansburg hosted by the New River Valley Chapter and the local NAACP on March 2. The forum provided a chance for chapter members to hear from students and parents in the Montgomery County Schools about the issues they face. After hearing from leaders who have been working for change, the group formed caucuses to address the problems that were identified.

"I was so proud that students were willing to share their thoughts and, most importantly, their experiences with education issues," said Tamara Cherry-Clarke, a Christiansburg parent and NRV Chapter leader. "They matter, they are our future, they are the leaders of tomorrow, they need us today."

"Disparities exist at MCPS," she added, "and we hope the administration is willing to finally bring that as a priority. There is a correlation between a student's learning environment and their academic achievement."

Brandy Faulkner, another of the forum's organizers, saw the impact the students' stories had on the other participants.

"I was excited," said Faulkner, "to see the community come together to talk about education. The students were so brave in sharing their stories, and the parents and community members were right there to support them."

Virginia Organizing members believe that people who are closest to an issue are also closest to its solutions, but are typically not closest to the power to make change. The group will continue to center the voices of parents and students in efforts to create education justice. Local chapter members will identify strategies for improving their schools based upon the ideas shared in the forum and will actively work toward those improvements.

Washington County Chapter held a great organizing workshop in Abingdon on March 9. The Appalachian Peace Education Center, Young Appalachian Patriots, and Washington County Independent Neighbors came together with Virginia Organizing to plan strategy and share skills for grassroots change throughout the area.

Attendees heard from Rev. Jacqueline Nophlin and Casey Almaroad from Bristol about their successful campaign to convince City Council not to close the elementary schools and build a giant new one. Now Bristol leaders are working on equitable funding for renovations of the schools they have.

They learned new skills for recruitment, meeting facilitation, issue selection, meeting with decision makers, and building power with media. They went deep into an analysis of why non-partisan, issue based organizing is so effective.

Thanks to all the groups that joined us, and the leaders and organizers who facilitated a very productive day of workshops!



Leader of the Month - Karen Downing of the Eastern Shore!



Karen Downing is a native of the Eastern Shore and its public schools. She went to Norfolk State University and then returned home in 1990 and got involved in service to the community.

When Virginia Organizing began to form a new chapter on the Shore in 2016, Karen got involved right away. She was concerned about many challenges that residents of the area face such as poverty, lack of access to health care, and education injustice. She has participated in Medicaid expansion rallies, visits to legislators in district and in Rich-

mond, and she has spoken to the Accomack School Board twice as a leader of her chapter.

"Health care was my first campaign, but now education and the school-to-prison pipeline are very important to me as a native of the Shore," she said. "This is an economically disadvantaged area, and you can have kids in one classroom, and some of them come from homelessness and some of them come from waterfront property." The first time Karen spoke to the school board, she discussed the need for better sensitivity and cultural awareness among teachers so that they know how to address the differences among students.

She spoke to the school board again this week about recruiting more teachers of color. "Last year 53 new teachers were hired, but only three of them were people of color," she said, "and yet 60 percent of the students in the area are children of color." New strategies are needed, and the board said they would like the chapter's help in pursuing this goal. Karen's vision is of a "student-to-teacher pipeline," which would recruit children in the schools to get education degrees and bring them home to the Eastern Shore to teach in the community.

Karen likes a number of the strategies that set Virginia Organizing apart from other groups. "We choose a specific target and campaign and take decisive action," she says, describing the Medicaid expansion celebration with Senator Lynwood Lewis as one example of the chapter's successful relationship building. She also appreciates the importance of canvassing directly affected people, listening to their views, and recruiting them to join the chapter's campaign. Thank you, Karen Downing, for the work and the vision you bring to the Eastern Shore Chapter!



Outreach Pastor Felicia Charles of the City of God Church, and Bob Straight, one of the hardest working leaders in the Fredericksburg Chapter, explained the affordable housing crisis on the radio recently. On "In the Community," Jessica Cash interviewed them about the chapter's work to get City Council to create an affordable housing trust fund to address the problem. The show ran on several local radio stations.

Affordable housing is an issue all over the Commonwealth. Virginia has one of the worst eviction rates in the United States. Thank you for your work, Bob and Felicia!



Take Action!

We held a press conference in Richmond to call on Governor Ralph Northam and Attorney General Mark Herring to meet with us. It was covered in television news from Norfolk to Roanoke and on all the Richmond stations. Governor Northam's office issued a statement saying that he has met with many "community leaders to hear their concerns and discuss meaningful ways of addressing racial equity in Virginia."

The governor has not met with us or even responded to our requests to meet with him. He is carefully choosing the people he will talk to, but we believe that as an elected official his responsibility is to hear from all of his constituents.

These scandals have happened not only to Governor Northam but to Virginia, to all of us. We want to offer him a way to move forward which will bring positive attention to the commonwealth and make us a model for the nation. We want to see profound, structural change. We want to see an end to the "Virginia Way" and business as usual.

Please contact Governor Northam at 804-786-2211 and let him know that you want him to meet with us and consider our list of actions he can take to dismantle institutional racism. To see our list of actions, see the press release on our website.

Local Chapters and Areas Served:

Staunton/Augusta/Waynesboro, Charlottesville/Albemarle County, Danville, Eastern Shore, Hampton/Newport News, Harrisonburg/Rockingham County, Fredericksburg, Lee County, Lynchburg, Martinsville/Henry County, New River Valley, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Washington County

On Campus: UMW, UVA, E&H, EMU, U of R, ODU, NSU, RU, TCC, VCU, JMU

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