

VIRGINIA **ORGANIZING**

News from the Grassroots

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We have been glad to see the governor, since the scandal broke, reorient his work towards racial equity in a number of decisions. We appreciated his vetoes of anti-immigrant bills and his support for better funding of schools. We were especially glad to see the counterproductive suspension of driver's licenses for nonpayment of court fines revoked. He has announced a focus on African American maternal mortality which is badly needed and overdue.

We have a long way to go before the Commonwealth becomes a model of racial justice, however. The work will only succeed if people in decision-making roles educate themselves deeply about what racism is and how it has provided them with privileges and power. Racism protects those who benefit from it from seeing what others have to endure. We do not intend to stop calling for real and lasting change.

Meeting with Governor Northam

On Friday, May 31, Chairperson Del McWhorter, board members Sandra Cook, Duane Edwards, and Ebony Guy, and Executive Director Brian Johns met with Governor Ralph Northam and several members of his staff.

"We felt the governor gave us a generous amount of time and listened carefully to everything we said," Del reported. "He apologized to Ebony when she spoke about the pain and anger the revelation of the yearbook picture had caused her."

"On the other hand, all of the staff who attended the meeting were white. The governor mentioned that his new diversity officer will be starting work soon, and we hope that that person will be able to make a difference. We did not receive any commitments in response to what we asked, but he also did not reject our proposals," Del added.

We believe our top priorities are things that can be done soon to make progress against systemic racism. They would make a profound difference in the way the Commonwealth does its work.

1. Governor Northam and his staff should participate in a dismantling racism workshop.
2. He should create a position for an analyst of police profiling data collections in order to promote more equity in law enforcement.
3. He should direct his diversity officer to audit his staff and commission appointees and bring more people of color into these positions.
4. He should intervene in the school-to-prison pipeline by seeking to hire more teachers of color and bringing restorative justice to schools.

Virginia Organizing has included dismantling racism in its mission since it was founded 24 years ago. When we work on social justice issues such as restoration of rights, or affordable housing, or environmental justice, we always act with the goal of taking down the structures of racial oppression in Virginia's laws and public services as well as promoting economic justice.

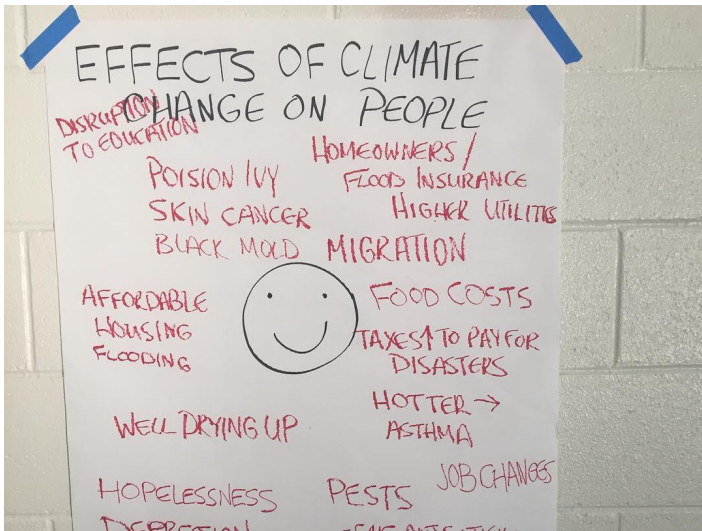


Meetings with Decision Makers

The Norfolk Chapter recently attended a meeting with Representative Elaine Luria and other progressive groups. Leader Doreen Douglas (right) spoke about the harm of predatory lending and asked Rep. Luria to support regulations on the industry.

Norfolk leaders have also been meeting with members of their local school board as part of their work on education reform. The New River Valley Chapter met with their school superintendent, and Eastern Shore met with their state senator. Newport News met with staff of Hampton Roads Transit (HRT) as part of their work to improve public transit in their community.

In Harrisonburg, leaders met with Chief Eric English of the Harrisonburg Police Department. He promised that his department would not provide any assistance for the threatened ICE raids. Unfortunately, Sheriff Bryan Hutcheson of Rockingham County would not agree to stop assisting ICE by detaining immigrants in the local jail.



Welcome to New Organizer, Jorge Mendez of Fredericksburg!

Environmental Justice Workshops

We are developing local environmental justice campaigns in our chapters. Martinsville and Charlottesville have both held workshops so that members can explore topics for organizing.

The Martinsville/Henry County Chapter held their Environmental Justice 101 workshop at the end of May. Since then, they have narrowed down the list of potential campaigns to increasing the availability of solar and home weatherization to lower utility bills. These actions will address climate change and help prevent communities of people of color from being targeted by polluters.

The Charlottesville Chapter partnered with Appalachian Voices, Clean Virginia, and the Virginia Poverty Law Center to develop a workshop on "Energy Democracy" on June 18. As we work to reduce fossil fuels, we must make sure that the cost of that change is shared in a fair way across income levels. Low-income households pay electric bills that are already too high. We are organizing to reduce the cost of electricity as efforts to fight climate change proceed.

If you want to get involved in environmental justice, let us know! We'd like to hear your ideas.

Jorge Mendez, Fredericksburg Organizer, grew up in El Salvador, where he began to work for human rights and political and social rights at the age of 13. It was a time of civil war and deprivation. Jorge began to organize other students to stand up for justice. Later he organized workers, farmers, and other oppressed groups. In 1999 he worked with the United Nations on justice for all the people of El Salvador.

By the time he went to university, Jorge had become a journalist for the sake of social justice and eventually became a professor of journalism. As Jorge says, "Everything I did, I did out of commitment to human rights, and for people's civil and civic development."

Jorge emigrated to the United States and settled in Stafford County in 2013. He soon began working as an organizer with the Latinx community in Stafford and Northern Virginia. He worked for immigration reform and for a host of other social justice issues such as raising the minimum wage, access to health care, affordable housing, and driver's licenses.

Jorge has four children, three of whom live in the Fredericksburg area. He says, "I'm interested in working not only with Latinx but also other people of color and low income people. I saw that Virginia Organizing was working with all of these groups to change living conditions for everyone."

"Everything depends on the people," Jorge adds. "When people want change, we can support them in fighting for it, and we're going to do that." Thank you for joining us, Jorge, and for your lifelong commitment to justice for all people.



Take Action!

The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has announced another destructive rule change targeting immigrant families. This one would force families that include any undocumented members out of public housing.

It could harm 108,000 people without leading to any benefit for low-income people still waiting for housing. 55,000 children who are citizens could be left homeless by this change. Please submit a public comment to the federal register to protest this appalling decision. The deadline is July 9.

See our website for a link to the federal register.

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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