

VIRGINIA ORGANIZING

News from the Grassroots

January 2021 Issue 98

General Assembly Session

Members have been working to participate in the current session and talk with legislators, in spite of the challenges of the online format. We have a long list of priorities, but here are some highlights.

The Richmond Area Chapter met with Delegate Lachrese Aird and discussed her House Joint Resolution 537, which legally recognizes that racism is a public health crisis. Members have submitted comments to the committees involved.



Leaders from around the state met with Senator Mamie Locke to hear how they can support her resolution, SJ 272, which would amend the Virginia Constitution to stop the state from taking away voting rights and also published an op-ed sharing their stories and perspectives.

We have also been working with the Fund our Schools Coalition. Leaders from Richmond, New River Valley, and Southwest have testified in favor of the School Staffing and Equity Act--SB1257 and HB1929. The House and Senate education subcommittees both passed the bills unanimously, so the Act is moving forward.

Read our legislative priorities on our website: <https://virginia-organizing.org/general-assembly-2021/>

Eastern Shore Broadband

On January 21, 97 people participated in a Zoom townhall to question public officials about the poor quality of broadband on the Eastern Shore. Senator Lynwood Lewis and Delegate Rob Bloxom discussed their work to try to ensure that rural residents could get access. School officials, business, and religious leaders reported the harmful consequences of the lack of reliable internet services.

Residents received information about grants and services that might be available, but there were no comprehensive answers to the larger problem. The townhall was recorded and shared on Facebook Live. The video is available on our Facebook page and by request.

Right: Bishop David Sabatino asked what faith communities could do to improve their ability to share services with members.

Norfolk Chapter Celebrates Revised Memo of Understanding

Virginia Organizing members, parents, workers, and community have opposed the use of armed police officers in Norfolk Public Schools. Research shows that SROs do not prevent school shootings. Furthermore, they are a detriment to the education and mental health of students of color in schools nationwide.

On January 20, members of the Norfolk School Board voted to revise the Memorandum of Understanding between Norfolk Public Schools and the Norfolk School Board. The new MOU gives School Resource Officers a more restorative role, rather than a punitive role, in the schools. There is currently one SRO per school in Norfolk, along with 3-4 security guards (SSOs).

Cierra Lewis, local activist and member of Virginia Organizing, says, "On behalf of Virginia Organizing, we are elated to see the Norfolk School Board implementing some of the changes we've championed. This is not a complete removal of School Resource officers as we had hoped. However, it is a victory toward a safe, thriving, and equitable learning experience for the children in our community."

Rev. Dr. John T. Myers, Associate Conference Minister of the Southern Conference of United Church of Christ, adds, "As a member of Virginia Organizing, I am ecstatic, grateful, and happy about Norfolk Public School's decision to revise its Memorandum of Understanding with the Norfolk Police Department. Under the revision, SROs will now serve as mentor figures to help students grow, thrive, and reach their highest potential and aspirations. This is a great first step forward in supporting all of our students, families, and communities."

The Norfolk Chapter of Virginia Organizing has worked on the campaign to remove SROs from Norfolk Public Schools since the George Floyd protests sparked localities to look into racial justice issues last summer. While the chapter had hoped for complete removal of SROs, they are happy that they were able to bring attention to this important issue, which caused the school board to look into the outdated MOU. The chapter looks forward to continuing their work to support evidence-based social emotional support for students.



Popular Education Series

From January 11 until February 15 will be offering a popular education online learning series about the General Assembly. Participants share their knowledge and experience about the bills being considered from our legislative priorities and learn from other leaders about how the General Assembly works.

Topics:

- Criminal Justice
- Education
- Environmental Justice
- Health and COVID
- Workers' Rights
- Housing and Evictions

If you would like to join us, register at
<https://tinyurl.com/GAtraining2021>

**CALL OR EMAIL
YOUR CITY COUNCIL
MEMBERS AND
URGE THEM TO VOTE
'NO' TO MIDDLE
RIVER REGIONAL
JAIL EXPANSION**



Take Action if you live in the Shenandoah Valley

The Harrisonburg/Rockingham, Staunton/Augusta, and Waynesboro Chapters support the campaign to stop a proposed expansion of the Middle River Regional Jail. If you live in any of these areas, take action by contacting your city councilors or county supervisors to urge them to say no to the jail expansion.

Another way to take action is to write a letter to the editor of your local paper about this issue.

Visit "Communities Against Middle River Jail Expansion" for more information on the proposed expansion.

Some background from the website:

- Officials are considering a costly, taxpayer-funded expansion. The jail's current capacity is 900 people. If they choose to expand the jail instead of reducing incarceration, the Middle River Regional Jail authority board has three options on the table. They're pursuing the most expensive one. The proposed expansion would add 400 beds, with a plan to expand it to 800 beds in the future.
- The expansion can be stopped. Five jurisdictions use Middle River: Harrisonburg, Rockingham County, Staunton, Waynesboro, and Augusta County. To expand the jail, four of those five would have to approve paying for it. So only two jurisdictions would be needed to stop an expansion.

- We don't need a bigger jail -- we are locking up too many people. Our region is putting over twice as many people in local jails as the national average.
- Instead of expanding the jail, we can ask public officials to take common-sense steps to reduce recidivism and incarceration for probation violations, and to address mental illness outside of the jail setting.



Thank you to all of our generous donors of 2020!

You made our 25th Anniversary the best year yet for Virginia Organizing's grassroots fundraising. Because of your contributions, we will be able to hire additional organizers to reach new leaders and communities in 2021!

Barbara Jefferson-Harris
State Governing Board

Local Chapters and Areas Served:

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

On Campus: Virginia Highlands Community College, Emory and Henry, UVA Wise, JMU, EMU, UVA, NSU, ODU, VT, Radford, Virginia Wesleyan, TCC, UMW

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