

VIRGINIA ORGANIZING

News from the Grassroots

June 2021 Issue 103



Racism as a Public Health Crisis

On June 17, more than 80 members of Virginia Organizing participated in our Summer Health Care Series discussion with special guest Del. Lashrecse Aird.

Del. Aird introduced the resolution to declare racism a public health crisis in the General Assembly during the last session.

Other panelists included Dr. Makunda Abdul-Mbacke of the Martinsville/Henry County Chapter, Sindy Portillo of the Richmond Chapter, and Chlo'e Edwards of Voices for Virginia's Children.

Sindy Portillo told this story of the unnecessary death of her friend:

"Her name was Sheila. She was very close to my family. And she was having a lot of stomach pain. When she went to the doctor, they discovered a cancerous tumor in her stomach. She was told that she could not get surgery because she didn't have health insurance and because she didn't have a Social Security number. She was working really hard with her husband to give to her children, but she stopped working because of the treatment. And sometimes they didn't have money to eat, not even to pay the rent.

"When the restrictions of the pandemic started, she had to leave chemotherapy, because they told her that they would be giving treatment only to the people that had health insurance and had a Social Security number. So her cancer continued to progress. She got really sick. Her children were suffering a lot emotionally. They were very depressed. They were not eating. She was sending them to bed early because she didn't have what to feed them. And after that, they told her that they didn't think that she was going to live any longer and the next day, she got sick of COVID, and she passed away. She left four children, 13, 11, 8, and 3 years old. I still remember when they were crying to please heal my mom. I will never forget that. That was a clear example to me of what is racist," Portillo said.

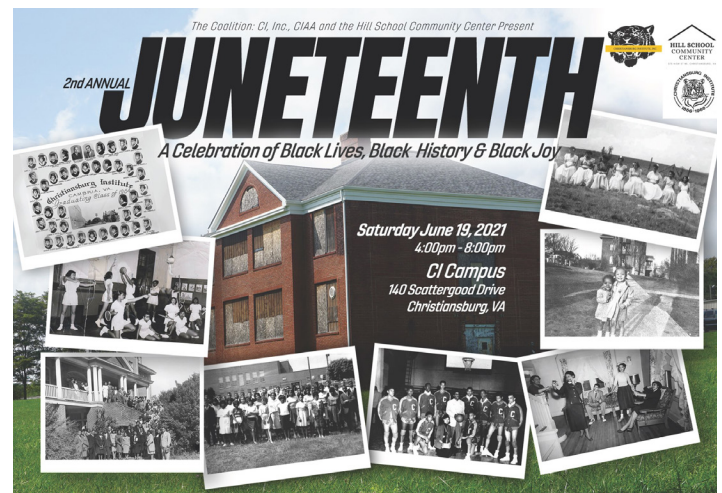
The recording of the discussion can be viewed on our Facebook page, VirginiaOrganizing, or our YouTube Channel, VOP Video.

Take action and contact your local health district. Ask them what they are doing to address the public health crisis of racism!

Juneteenth in Christiansburg!

The New River Valley Chapter co-sponsored a community gathering to celebrate the historic liberation history of Juneteenth and the ancestral tradition of Christiansburg Institute. Hundreds of people attended.

Virginia Organizing leaders volunteered to support with parking, vendor coordination, and event support. They also had brief conversations with many elected officials, including Senator David Suetterlein, Delegate Chris Hurst, and members of town council.

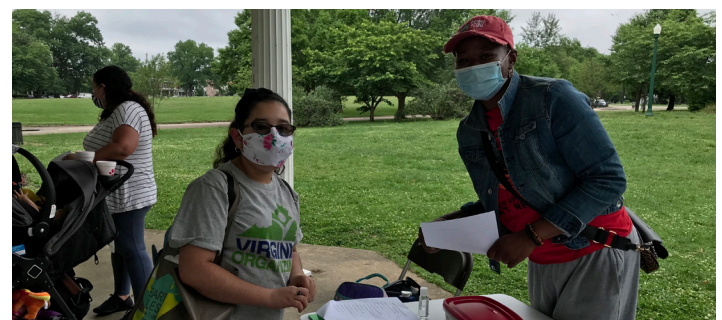


Richmond Area Chapter Celebration!

After more than a year of meeting only online, the Richmond Area Chapter held an outdoor celebration and planning meeting with masks and social distancing.

Recently the chapter supported the activism of RVA Rapid Transit. Anna Clemens and Bennie Gates published an op-ed in the Richmond Times Dispatch calling for fare free bus service to continue. And free service will continue!

Bennie and Anna also joined a meeting with U.S. Rep. Don McEachin and national partners and successfully lobbied him to sign onto the Stronger Communities for Better Transit Act.



Featured Partner – Lending Hands

This is the first in a monthly series of profiles featuring our partners in the Joint Plan of Work program. The Joint Plans of Work may be a lesser known aspect of Virginia Organizing's work, but it is another way we leverage grassroots energy by borrowing and sharing power with dozens of groups and organizations throughout our state. Groups who have a joint plan of work with us are fiscally sponsored programs of Virginia Organizing who operate under our 501(c)(3) in order to utilize our administrative resources, enabling them to focus full-time on their important work.

Cherry Henley, the founder and Director of Lending Hands in Charlottesville, has always found her energy in connecting people to resources to help them thrive. She launched Lending Hands in 2009 to be a network resource agency for those who are formerly incarcerated, and she assists people as they seek to obtain housing, employment, and other resources necessary to stabilizing their lives as they transition back into society.



Henley does this work from a place of personal experience, having been incarcerated herself for 3 ½ years. "My belief is that everyone wants to live a productive life," she says. Her experience of personal trauma and the injustices of our criminal justice system helped her to understand how so many end up in prisons and jails.

Even while incarcerated Henley enjoyed helping others get access to resources, seeking to fill the gaps that made it harder for people to make it on the outside. After her incarceration she drove for the work release department at Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail for over nine years while working out of her home office.

In addition to helping formerly incarcerated individuals navigate the system and find resources, Lending Hands provides its own temporary housing for people in transition. Henley says that "on a typical day I am responding to the needs of those who need housing, jobs, or advocacy help. Lending Hands tries to meet these needs by providing resources directly or by making connections to other organizations." She also works with other agencies in Charlottesville to challenge the systemic injustices that hold people back. The Lending Hands women's home has provided transitional housing for those re-entering back into society.

Henley gets her energy from watching people survive and thrive through community support. "I've seen people now [serve] on boards and commissions, go back to school, start businesses," she says.

When asked what she needs from the community to make her work possible, she offered a list: "I need the community to be engaged, I need people not to stigmatize others without giving them a chance, I need accountability from legislators." She also repeatedly stressed the importance of community support, and the value of individuals and organizations who offer help. "I am honored to do the work of making lives better."

To learn more about Lending Hands you can visit their website at <https://lendinghandsnetwork.weebly.com>.

Begin your Legacy!

Virginia Organizing is only as powerful as the voices and people in our communities. One way to make sure those voices can continue to be heard is by creating a lasting legacy with a bequest. Including a legacy with Virginia Organizing in your will costs you nothing upfront but is a powerful commitment to grassroots organizing and real change in Virginia forever.

In honor of our 25th anniversary, we want to challenge you to create a legacy that will keep our work growing and building power for the future. Begin your legacy today at <https://virginia-organizing.org/legacy-giving/>!

Suffolk Chapter at City Council

This month the Suffolk Chapter spoke to their city council about police reform. "We all saw the incident with the Army lieutenant that got pepper sprayed in a traffic stop by Windsor police," leader Tion Ashby said.

"That's not far from us. The army lieutenant was in uniform and was still dehumanized by Windsor police. I look like the Army lieutenant. We both are people of color. Every person of color is directly affected by the bad policing practices of some law enforcement officers. I don't want this to happen to anyone else of color. That's why we need a permanent police chief and we need an effective Civilian Review 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
Richmond/Chesterfield/Henrico
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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