



## News from the Grassroots

March 2021 Issue 100

**Yes, this is the 100th issue of our newsletter! Another milestone as we continue to celebrate our 25th anniversary in 2021. Before reading on, please consider a special donation. Your support makes our work--and this newsletter--possible!**



### Health Care Town Hall with Senator Tim Kaine

On March 23, we held an online town hall meeting with Sen. Tim Kaine to celebrate the 11th anniversary of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and discuss health care policy.

Leaders asked Sen. Kaine questions about racial justice and equity in health care. We want:

- the improvements in the ACA included in the American Rescue Plan (ARP) to be made permanent
- the wealthiest Americans to pay their fair share in taxes
- the cost of prescription drugs to be brought down until they are affordable to everyone who needs them

The meeting included Spanish and ASL interpretation as well as closed captioning from Virginia Relay. Thank you to all of our interpreters!

Watch the video on our YouTube channel or Facebook page.

Take action on health care by calling your member of Congress at 202-224-3121. Tell them to make these health care improvements in the ARP permanent.

### Environmental Justice Town Hall with U.S. Rep. Don McEachin

On March 25, Virginia Organizing's Environmental Justice Strategy Committee organized a town hall with Rep. Donald McEachin. Leaders from Virginia Organizing and partner groups spoke about the pollution and violation of rights their communities are experiencing, from flooding in Norfolk to the lack of green space in Richmond, and the devastation of the Mountain Valley Pipeline in Southwest.

Speakers included

- Shelia Carter, a leader in the Norfolk Chapter who spoke about flooding and pollution in predominantly Black neighborhoods of Norfolk;
- Sheri Shannon of Southside ReLEAF, which works to provide green space on the south side of Richmond
- Russell Chisholm of POWHR, who spoke about the devastation the Mountain Valley Pipeline is causing in Southwest and Southside Virginia

Rep. McEachin spoke about his Environmental Justice for All Act and the creation of better protections for communities of color he hopes to pass this year. "You cannot address the climate crisis without addressing environmental justice issues," he said.

Brandy Faulkner of the New River Valley Chapter moderated the discussion, and other chapter leaders asked Rep. McEachin questions about whether the bill would address transit issues, concerns about the water pollution that results from chicken farming on the Eastern Shore, and how to convince decision-makers to take environmental justice more seriously.

88 people participated in the meeting. We felt hopeful and energized by the powerful voices of the directly affected people who spoke and by Rep. McEachin's inspiring ideas.

Watch the video on our YouTube channel.

Does your representative support Environmental Justice? Contact them to find out! The Congressional switchboard is 202-224-3121.



## Fighting for Justice includes the Environment!

Patrice Smallwood, Virginia Organizing intern and leader in the Norfolk Chapter, recently published this op-ed in the *Virginian-Pilot* and the *Daily Press* about her community's fight to stop a trash dump from destroying their neighborhood:



My personal fight for environmental justice in my community began three years ago. I am a life-long member of New Macedonia Christian United Church of Christ in the Bruce's Park area of Norfolk. Our church worked alongside community partners and local residents to demand justice against environmental inequality. In 2018, a local business attempted to construct a solid waste facility, otherwise known as a trash dump, in the heart of our neighborhood. A neighborhood where residents worked in their homes and gardens. A neighborhood where students played during recess at the local elementary schools. A neighborhood where our congregations gathered for worship and outreach. While the community was left in the dark, the trash dump facility owners were given permission to make preparation and move equipment onto the lot for construction. This trash dump proposal sparked my community's activism and demand for justice.

As residents, property owners, students, parishioners, and small business owners, we demanded this business and our elected officials answer the question, 'Why consider placing a trash dump in the heart of this predominately African American neighborhood without first consulting the residents who live here?' It was clear to us: no research meant no respect. It took nearly 6 months of petitioning, door-to-door canvassing, and submitting emails, letters and verbal comments to city council, industrial business owners, and the Department of Environmental Quality. Finally, the company's plan to place the trash dump in our community was overturned. Indeed there is power in the voice of the people. So, why is this issue so important today? Because low-income and underprivileged communities are still being disproportionately burdened by environmental injustices.

Big businesses and major utility companies must be regulated to ensure these injustices don't continue. For this reason, I am highly disappointed with our Virginia legislators' decision to overlook and reject the majority of environmental justice bills during the General Assembly 2021 session. In particular, the Omnibus Environmental Justice Bill (HB 2074), introduced by Del. Shelly Simonds, if passed, would have ensured that true environmental justice is being carried out in the communities that need it most. This bill would have mandated state agencies to adopt and implement environmental justice policies throughout many agency-specific activities. The bill would have also required more accountability and pre-planning from the Department of Environmental Quality and its Citizen Boards, creating new requirements for obtaining permits and ensuring community participation before starting any new construction or redevelopments. Additionally, the Omnibus bill would have required local planning commissions to consider environmental justice issues in their comprehensive plans. This bill needed our legislators' support in order to protect our marginalized communities and communities of color.

When corporations are permitted to pollute our neighborhoods by placing hazardous facilities and materials in the places where families gather outdoors for barbecues and children play basketball in the street, it is a clear indication of a lack of respect and concern for the people who live, work, and worship in those communities. Environmental justice is nonetheless justice; for clean air, clean drinking water, and clean energy are basic human rights. Whether a community recognizes environmental issues when a new development is proposed or learns of the issues long after it has moved through various stages of planning, community leaders must remember that it is never too late to take action and demand change. If your community is faced with environmental injustices like mine was, spread the message to everyone in the community, call and email those behind the injustice and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality to voice your opposition and concerns. Contact info for their regional offices can be found at <https://www.deq.virginia.gov/Locations.aspx>.



## Women's Rights

We have recently partnered with several groups to organize for women's rights.

ReflectUS has been holding discussions on Twitter about the difficulties women face in running for public office. Board member Barbara Jefferson-Harris participated in a meeting with state senator Ghazala Hashmi and others.

We have also joined the coalition, Virginia Promise Partnership, to "ensure all Virginia families have access to affordable, quality child care by 2030."

What action do you want to take for women's rights? Reply to this email and let us know!

## 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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