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March 8, 2022

To: Virginia General Assembly Budget Conference Committee Members
Re: Budget Priorities

Virginia Organizing's members have focused on several legislative priorities this year. We wanted to see better funding for education, housing, and mental health, in addition to our longtime focus on expansion of voting rights, environmental justice, and health care in general.

As the State Governing Board of Virginia Organizing, we are asking you to include as much funding as possible for mental health services, including the \$12.2 million in the Senate version of the budget to fund inflation adjustment for Medicaid reimbursed Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (**Item304#7s**). We urge you to oppose House amendments that cut \$19.6 million from Mental Health Facilities (**Item C-37 #1h, Item C-38 #1h, and Item C-39 #1h**) and the House amendment that cuts \$15 million from the introduced budget for permanent supportive housing for people with Serious Mental Illness (**Item 313 #3h**)

In education, we urge you to **fund the At-Risk Add-On generously**. The At-Risk Add-On (**137#14s**) provides badly needed resources to schools in high-poverty areas so that students have a fair chance of success. We call on you to support the Senate version, which allocates \$268 million. There are few areas of public spending which could generate more benefits to all Virginians in the long run than this initiative. Let's invest in good education for all of our children and turn around a long history of inequality.

Similarly, Virginians also face a crisis in evictions because of a lack of low-income housing. We encourage inclusion of the Senate's additional **\$190 million in funding for the Virginia Housing Trust Fund (114#5)**. The VHTF pays for the preservation and creation of affordable housing. The Virginia Poverty Law Center has found that over 200,000 families are housing insecure in Virginia. How can such a wealthy state with a booming economy allow so many of our neighbors to live in that condition? The Senate budget is only a beginning to address such an enormous issue.

Finally, we urge action to support a just transition in Southwest Virginia. We urge you to **adopt budget item 115#6s (Deeds)**. This funding would (1) create two Coalfield Community Development Program Managers at DHCD for grant management and economic development in the coalfields and (2) establish the Coalfield Inter-agency Task Force to explore cross-agency approaches to revitalizing the coalfields. The coalfield region has borne much of the brunt of both coal mining and its collapse, and this environmental justice community deserves much better of the rest of Virginia. We believe the Senate version will provide a better structure for oversight and accountability than the House version.

Thank you for considering these concerns. Please do not hesitate to contact Brian Johns, executive director, if you need more information. You can reach him at bjohns@virginia-organizing.org or 434-984-4655 ext. 227.

Sincerely,

Del McWhorter
Chair, Henrico County

Duane Edwards
Vice-Chair, Spotsylvania County

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