



## News from the Grassroots

May 2022 Issue 114

### Rally for Mental Health Funding

The Wythe County Chapter held a rally yesterday to demand more funding for mental health in the General Assembly budget. Our communities need better services!

Logan Nester of Mt. Rogers Community Services (left) spoke about the crisis. Thanks to everyone who came out.

The General Assembly will hold a special session on the budget soon. **Please contact your senator and delegate and urge them to provide more funding for mental health care.**



### A Day without Childcare

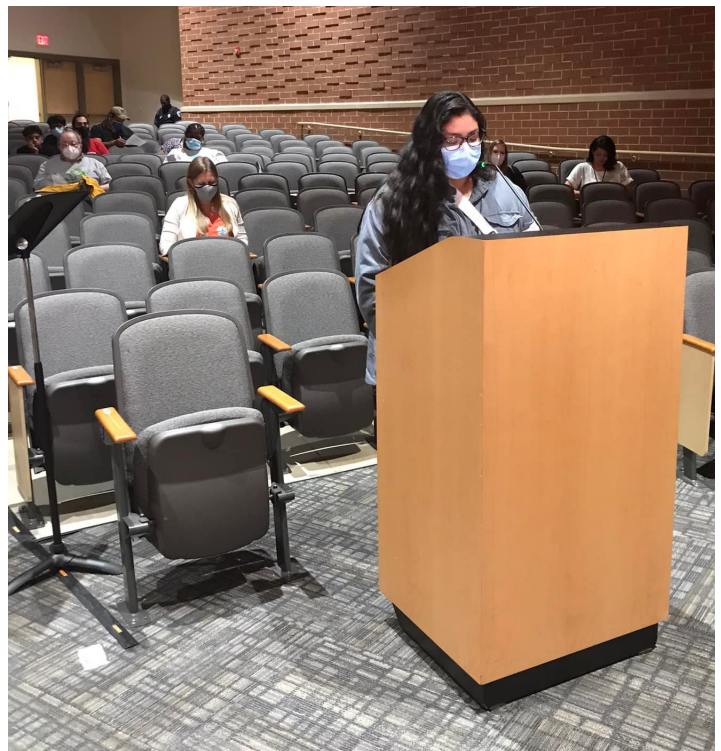
The Newport News/Hampton Chapter held a "Day without Childcare" rally on May 9 along with hundreds of other groups nationwide. We are bringing parents and providers together to demand better pay and affordable quality childcare for everyone. Childrens' well-being depends on it.



### Richmond Chapter School Board Action

Members of the Richmond Chapter gave comments at the Richmond Public Schools board meeting this month in favor of the Student, Parent, Caregiver Bill of Rights that the chapter has worked for two years to develop with the RPS community.

Cynthia Reyes, a leader in the chapter, was one of many members who commented. She spoke about the school officials who wrongly put her daughter in an English language learning classroom because she "didn't look like she spoke English."



### Save the Date for GG2022!

The Grassroots Gathering will be in person for the first time in three years in 2022, the weekend of September 9-11. Please contact your local organizer if you want to join us.

We're also holding our traditional Beach Raffle: one week in a 3-bedroom oceanfront condo on Hilton Head, South Carolina. The winning ticket will be drawn at the Grassroots Gathering.

Buy tickets on our website: <https://virginia-organizing.org/beach-week-raffle-2022>

## Tri-Cities Interest Meeting

The first meeting of the developing Tri-Cities Chapter happened this month in Petersburg! It was well attended and participants brought concerns about many issues that impact quality of life in the city.



### Featured Community Partner | Living Energy Institute

Hear me out: houses built out of straw and mud. For everyone. In the near future.

Oh, and let's ditch the electric grid altogether.

That is the pitch that Alexis Zeigler at Living Energy Farm is making to the world, and he has already shown that it works, if only the world will listen. He says that this old-fashioned sounding construction technique mixed with technologies that are already available will play a big part in ameliorating humans' impact on the environment.

He has already built a farm complex on the concept, and has retrofitted houses in Charlottesville and Louisa as well, demonstrating that the system can be adapted to any built environment. It is really quite simple: build or wrap the walls in straw bales that insulate the building, seal them with stucco, use solar heat racks to provide heat and hot water, and solar electric panels to power a decentralized microgrid based on DC (direct current) power.

If you thought that the idea of off-grid housing built out of mud and straw bales sounded primitive, then you should know that we'd keep a lot of the things we will lose if we stay the course we're on now: we'll have plenty of hot running water, refrigeration, and warm ovens, and we can scroll Instagram, check email, and binge Netflix all we want (okay, maybe don't pull an all-nighter). Cloudy days, winter storms? Irrelevant: there are no powerlines to break, and indestructible, long-lasting nickel-iron batteries charged from the panels keep the lights on for days.

Another upside? We won't have mountaintops and oceans sprouting windmills. Fields and forests won't become acres and acres of solar panels. No plundering indigenous lands for precious metals to power a "green" economy. No long-distance transmission lines slicing through the forests.

That doesn't mean we won't have to change some things about the way we live. We might need to live closer together in tighter communities and share more – families and friends may form little micro-grid "villages" in rural areas or neighborhoods of condos in the cities. As we already saw, we can retrofit a lot of existing housing. To adjust to the capacity of the grid we might need to work shorter days (who would complain about that?), and put off some tasks until the sun is out. Architecture will have to accommodate walls as thick as straw bales because houses will be built out of, well, straw bales.

The Living Energy Institute, an initiative of Living Energy Farm, has a Joint Plan of Work with Virginia Organizing, and their mission is to spread the word about micro-grid systems around the world. The farm, which is an intentional community of 9 people, includes two bale buildings (a house and kitchen), a machine shop, and several acres of farm land where they grow crops for their community and seeds for commercial sale.

Alexis is an inventor at heart, which is why he plans to spend less time farming and more time in the machine shop, honing and perfecting the solar cookers, biogas heaters, DC appliances, and farm equipment that we will all need to create a sustainable future. The Living Energy Institute recently received a grant to move forward with a micro-grid project in Puerto Rico, where the need for local, independent power grids has been made apparent as increasingly devastating hurricane seasons and neglect by the US government has exposed the vulnerability of centralized electric grids.

"There is no market for this here in the US, so I'm taking it overseas where people are ready to adopt it now," Alexis says. While the changes we need are just as urgent here at home, Alexis is pessimistic about their prospects as long as salvaging our existing way of life is more profitable.

But we already saw how vulnerable we are with the status quo right here in Virginia, when ice storms left much of the region without power for days in February. The woods around Living Energy Farm were shredded by the wind and ice, and the community had to cut its way out to reopen the 1/2-mile road to the farm. The farm never lost power.

"With a centralized grid, if you knock one piece out, the whole thing goes down," Alexis points out. "Even traditional off-grid houses have the same problem." In other words, even if you have your own rooftop solar panels, an AC (alternating current) system sends everything through that circuit breaker in the closet. It's like a line of dominoes, or like that string of Christmas lights that blinks out when a single bulb burns out. A lot of people who try to go "off grid" give up because their system proves too unreliable.

With the DC system at Living Energy Farm, each solar panel has a different job to do. One set of panels powers the kitchen, another the house, and a third the machine shop. And to the perplexity of many engineers, everything runs just fine even when significantly underpowered. Alexis can fire up every machine and appliance in the shop at 4pm on a hazy day, when the panels outside are at a low ebb.

When the sun goes down, though, a lot of jobs have to wait. And that is where we will have to learn to adapt to our conditions and accept limits. Living Energy Institute is telling the world that it is a simple matter of mathematics: the longer we keep relying on a techno-fix to salvage the system we have and the way of life we're living now, the longer it will take for us to wean ourselves off fossil fuels. "We'll cook the planet," Alexis warns. But the technology we need is comfortably running a farm in Louisa, VA right now, ready to take off as soon as the world is ready for it. Hopefully it will be sooner rather than later.

## 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 Area, Suffolk,  
Tri-Cities Area, Washington County, Waynesboro, Wytheville

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