

VIRGINIA ORGANIZING

News from the Grassroots

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Happy Birthday to the Affordable Care Act!

After 13 years of non-stop attacks and sabotage from opponents, the Affordable Care Act has not only survived but thrived, hitting record enrollment in 2023 by providing quality, affordable coverage to over 346,140 Virginians and improving coverage for over 100 million Americans nationwide.

Its survival today is a testament to both the popularity and effectiveness of the ACA's policies and to the hard work of advocates like you around the country who have steadfastly worked to preserve and expand its reach. As a result, health care is more affordable and accessible than ever!

Both the ACA and Medicaid were invaluable tools throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring individuals could get affordable coverage when they needed it most. But it shouldn't take an emergency to make health care affordable and accessible to millions more people: Congress has the power to make permanent the increased affordability provisions and Medicaid improvements that have brought the number of uninsured people to record lows over the last year.

The developing chapter in Pulaski held a celebration of the anniversary on March 23 to support President Biden's recently announced budget blueprint:

- to make enhanced premium tax credits permanent in the ACA and increase investment in Medicaid
- to address the current mental health and substance abuse crisis
- to provide home based and community care options to aging people and people with disabilities
- to extend provisions to lower drug prices beyond Medicare so that people of all ages can get affordable prescription drugs.



Annual Meetings

This month chapters are holding their annual meetings, where they celebrate their victories, take stock of all the work they've done, plan for the future, and just enjoy being together. Portsmouth may win the prize for the biggest annual meeting ever! And they had a big win to celebrate--the city schools added a mindfulness curriculum to their elementary schools.

This is a community that's changing the world around them for the better



Dismantling Racism Workshops

In addition to our yearly three-day statewide Dismantling Racism workshop, chapters also offer one-day workshops for their areas. During the workshop, members share personal experiences in small groups in addition to learning definitions of different kinds of racism.

On March 4, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Newport News/Hampton, and Suffolk members got together to hold their one-day workshop in Norfolk. In April, the Fredericksburg area will hold their workshop in Stafford.

In Wise County, leaders are calling for the school board to participate in our Dismantling Racism workshop because a blackface photo of a school board member recently surfaced, but most members of the board could not seem to understand why anyone was offended. Dr. William Turner, a leading thinker, writer, and organizer about African American life in Appalachia called for the board to participate in the workshop in this op-ed.

Norfolk Chapter wins their Disability Rights campaign!

Last summer, Norfolk leaders held listening sessions where they heard from people with disabilities about the difficulties they experience as they navigate the city. Chapter members and people directly affected by these issues took this list of concerns to City Council through private meetings with members of Council, an op-ed in the Pilot, and public speaking at a council meeting. Over the course of several months, the City has committed to changing a long list of issues people encounter, including dangerous intersections, sidewalks, bus stops, and more.

Already, over \$100 million has been allocated to fixing sidewalks, a bus stop is being put in front of Endependence Center, and the website has been fixed so an ADA coordinator is easier to locate.



Featured Partner | Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards (SAMS)

The people at Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards (SAMS), a longstanding Joint Plan of Work partner of Virginia Organizing, have stood up to commonplace negative portrayals of Appalachia with the powerful insistence that the land and the people there are beautiful, diverse, and not only worth saving, but their fate is tied to the rest of ours. Popular stereotypes notwithstanding, Appalachia is at the center of the fight against extraction-fueled climate change, and our future depends on standing together shoulder to shoulder in the struggle.

SAMS is an organization of concerned people working to build just and equitable communities while addressing current and legacy costs of extraction in Appalachia. The genesis of the group was in 2005 when a 3-year-old child was killed when a boulder fell off an access road into his house. The road had been constructed illegally by a coal company. Outrage in the community catalyzed citizens to organize and hold companies accountable for their destructive practices and their impact on residents. The conversations grew as people called attention to the inherent problems with mining and its disproportionate impact on Appalachia specifically.

Adam Malle and Jess Mullins Fullen are SAMS's Administrator and Lead Organizer respectively, and their backgrounds encapsulate the inherent diversity of the region. Adam might fit the stereotypical profile of an Appalachian man: he is white, and he grew up in a coal mining family and has family members who are still employed in the industry. Jess, on the other hand, is Black, and for many of her younger years wondered if she really had a place in the community. But she was raised by her grandparents in coal camp housing, and so shares the same history of mining and its impacts with her neighbors. She proudly calls herself Appalachian in defiance of the images the world has of the place.

And the land itself is beautiful and vibrant, and SAMS is fighting tooth and nail to make sure it stays that way. Their latest struggle is to stop the resurrection of the Ison Rock Ridge surface mine, but SAMS also puts considerable energy into monitoring decommissioned mines to make sure companies follow through on mitigation projects, and they played a significant role in mutual aid efforts in the wake of the flooding in Eastern Kentucky in the fall of 2022.

"The coalfields cross the arbitrary state lines," Jess points out, so SAMS's mission extends beyond Virginia, and they work in coalition with several groups who each carry a piece of the struggle. They helped to purchase and renovate a building in Big Stone Gap in Wise County called the Mountain Movement Hub, a cooperative venture where organizations can share office and meeting space.

"The purpose is to be a shared resource space to lift burdens off movement work, to expand beyond what individuals or organizations can do on their own," Adam explains.

SAMS has had a joint plan of work with Virginia Organizing for several years, but is now in the process of spinning off to be its own freestanding nonprofit and an anchor for the Hub. It has grown in leaps and bounds in the last two years, and the key to its growth is people, the Appalachian community. From the very beginning their organizing has brought forth the voices and agency of people who have been stereotyped and dismissed in mainstream American culture for generations. SAMS gives the community a channel through which they can fight for themselves.

When asked for examples of energizing or encouraging moments, both Jess and Adam have exciting stories to tell: Jess tells of a miner named Buddy who cracked jokes about "tree huggers" at first, but then became an outspoken critic of the mining industry and its destructive effects on his community. Adam tells of people deciding not to move away from the area because of the community support they receive through SAMS. For both of them, and for everyone who has been touched by their work, SAMS is about finding community and using it as a space to make things better for everyone.

Tax deadlines...

Tax deadlines are fast approaching and as a dedicated supporter of Virginia Organizing, you can help to build power with other members of our communities to address a variety of issues that affect our lives.

Here are ways you can give:

1. Donating Stocks: When you donate appreciated stocks, you avoid paying the capital gains tax. You are also eligible to take a charitable deduction for the entire donation amount if you itemize deductions. It only takes a couple of minutes to access account information and set up a donation.
2. Giving from your IRA: If you are 70.5 or older and have a traditional IRA. In many cases, IRA giving is 100% tax-free for eligible donors. And if you're 72 or older, an IRA gift can also count towards your Required Minimum Distribution (RMD).

Please consider these simple ways to take a stand for everyone's well-being in Virginia.

Local Chapters and Areas Served:

Charlottesville/Albemarle County, Danville, Eastern Shore, Harrisonburg/Rockingham County, Fredericksburg Area, Lee County, Lynchburg, Martinsville/Henry County, New River Valley, Newport News/Hampton, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Pulaski, Richmond Area, Suffolk, Waynesboro, Wise County, Wythe County

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