



VIRGINIA ORGANIZING

News from the Grassroots

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Candidates for State Senate Robert Beckman and Renie Gates

Candidate Forum

The Wythe County Chapter and partners held a candidate forum on October 23 that was attended by more than 100 people. Many thanks to Denise Davis who moderated the discussion.

The forum was co-sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce and the Wythe-Bland Young Professionals, but all of the candidates from one political party refused to participate.

Democracy only works when elected officials hold themselves accountable to all of their constituents.



Housing, Well & Septic

Eastern Shore held a press conference last week to announce their new campaign for access to affordable well and septic on the Shore. This effort is the beginning of a larger campaign on housing.

Dinita Warner spoke about how the lack of infrastructure in her county has affected her. "About 8 years ago my well went dry in Bayside, causing me to leave my residence. For the last three years I have lived in a home that has rust in the water. I had to share a well that has a major leak, causing my utility water pump to cost \$170-180/month. Due to the recent discovery of the shared well and the massive leak, I needed a new well to be installed. I was quoted \$8900 to fix this well. Most low-income families do not have this. I would like to see more licensed professionals on the Eastern Shore to be able to build these wells, as well as lowered fees for low-income families."

The chapter is calling on the Accomack County Board of Supervisors to prioritize these critical issues on the Eastern Shore. Chapter leaders will continue reaching out to new communities and meeting with local elected officials to ensure everyone on the Shore has access to safe, affordable housing, water, and sewer services.



Small Modular Reactors Forum

In Norton, members of the Wise County Chapter helped organize a town hall discussion of the nuclear reactors being planned for their community, where no opportunity for public comment has been offered so far.

Tiffany Hunter spoke on behalf of the chapter:

"We are not guinea pigs. We have homes here, lives here. Educate yourself. Educate others around you."

Thanks to The Clinch Coalition, Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, the Alliance for Appalachia, and the Appalachian Peace Education Center for co-hosting.



The Danville Chapter met with a new organizer, in person at last!



Re-entry Organizing

We continue to push for Governor Youngkin to bring back the process that made restoration automatic for returning citizens.

The developing chapter in Halifax County participated in a meeting with returning citizens in October. Many participants were eager to get their rights restored and start voting again. The meeting was hosted by the Tri-County Re-entry & Community Collaboration Council.

In the Richmond Chapter, Darnell Coleman wrote this excellent LTE about restoration of rights that was published in the Richmond Times Dispatch:

"As a returning citizen and someone who has had my rights restored, I am appalled by the Governor's lack of compassion for voting rights for ALL Virginians. In March of 2023, Senator Spruill's office released information to the community that the Governor had basically ceased all restoration of rights for prior convicted felons. The restoration of rights process has been slowly getting better over the past 20 years in a bipartisan effort. Virginia Organizing, a statewide group of which I have been a chapter member of for three years, was shocked by this discovery.

"In 2019 my voting rights were restored by then Governor Ralph Northam. It was one of the happiest moments of my life at that time. I would watch the news and see the things that are going on in politics and in our communities throughout the country and say somebody should do something about that. I realized that I was somebody who should do something. I have been exercising my right to vote since that time trying to effect change for myself and those who can't do it themselves at the polls.

"Voting rights are civil rights. Governor Youngkin should not be preventing anyone from participating in this civil process, especially those who have served their time and want to contribute in a meaningful way to bettering their community through the democratic process."

Write a letter to your local paper about this issue, and if you write one, let us know. You can find resources to help you on our website.



Community Gear Library Featured Community Partner

Harrisonburg, Virginia, in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley, is surrounded by mountains. Most of those mountains are public land, whether it be the remote and rustic George Washington National Forest, or the iconic Shenandoah National Park, there dozens upon dozens of hikes and recreational opportunities within an hour's drive.

If getting outdoors and connecting with the land has been your

preferred mode of recreation all your life, or something you're curious about but have done very little, Harrisonburg is an ideal place to explore.

But for a lot of people, the mountains that are geographically close are out of reach. That is because access to public land, while easy in theory, has many hidden barriers. The Community Gear Library, one of Virginia Organizing's newest Joint Plan of Work partners, seeks to address all of them, from the personal to the systemic. Their goal is to help community members get outdoors by breaking down the barriers of cost and access.

Harriet Flynn, the organization's founder, has been an outdoor enthusiast her entire life, and her day job is as a Program Supervisor at Harrisonburg Parks and Recreation.

"My jobs have always revolved around getting people outdoors and having new experiences," she says. "I believe everyone should be able to do it if they want to."

Harriet is troubled by the fact that the outdoors is a de facto white space – a space that has historically been unsafe for BIPOC community members, and a place that BIPOC and low-income community members struggle to afford. The high cost of gear, such as tents, sleeping pads, sleeping bags, and trekking poles, and the consequent lack of experience with outdoor gear, makes the prospect of a camping trip seem unrealistic for many. And in the Shenandoah Valley, a violent history of eviction and segregation of outdoor spaces has sent the explicit message that not all are welcome. Running a gauntlet of Confederate flags just to get to the trailhead makes the environment intimidating for would-be BIPOC trail users.

The Community Gear Library partners with the Massanutten Regional Library to lend out hiking and camping gear for free. To become a borrower, one must simply obtain a library card and attend an information session to get a basic tutorial on how to use the equipment. So far, the Gear Library has hosted three BIPOC hikes to introduce community members to safe, accessible trail options in the area – visible, highly trafficked spots located on major roads, enjoyed as a group to provide safety in numbers.

The Gear Library officially opened in August, and so far has loaned out three camping kits and a set of hiking poles to a total of nine people. It is a small beginning, but the group is growing as it acquires more equipment and engages in extensive outreach in the community.

"I would like to see our model replicated at libraries everywhere," Harriet says. "There should always be free resources for outdoor equipment, and programs like this should be run by public libraries. Ours is just the second one to do this."

The growth of the Community Gear Library depends on cash donations. They do not accept used gear. By purchasing new equipment from business partners, they are able to have sets of identical items, allowing for interchangeable parts, meaning easier repairs and a more sustainable supply. If you would like to support their work, you can find their website on our home page.

Local Chapters and Areas Served:

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

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