



## News from the Grassroots

January 2024 Issue 133

### General Assembly Updates

Chapters have started visiting their legislators at the General Assembly, and members have also been participating in lobby day opportunities with partner groups. We're thrilled to see so many good bills introduced and being passed by their first subcommittees.

#### Thank you for taking action on our priorities!

HB 906, which would protect Virginians from utility shutoffs during extreme temperatures (and more!), passed House Labor and Commerce subcommittee #3 thanks to strong support from our members and partners. It still has a long way to go, and we don't want it to be weakened. Please reach out to your senator and delegate to let them know the importance of utility shutoff protections. People should not have to try to survive this cold weather without power or heat!

#### Housing

Our Housing Strategy Committee has chosen 10 bills to support this session. They will be tracking these bills and we will update their progress in our legislative priorities document. (The link is on our website).

#### Childcare

While there are a few bills that may improve access to childcare, we're mainly focused on the budget, so updates will come later in the session.

#### Health Care

SB 231 (Hashmi) and HB 970 (Tran): "Cover All Kids," a bill that would make all children eligible for Medicaid regardless of immigration status, has been referred to its respective committees: Education and Health in the Senate and Health and Human Services in the House. The House subcommittee will hold a hearing on this bill today at 4 p.m.

Members of the committee include Tran(Chair), Shin, Srinivasan, Henson, Gardner, Orrock, Walker, and Higgins. If your delegate is on this list, please tell them you support HB 970.

SB 274 (Deeds) and HB 570 (Delaney): The Prescription Drug Affordability Board's Senate bill was referred to Education and Health, but Education and Health has referred it to Commerce and Labor. The House bill has been referred to the Health and Human Services subcommittee: Health.

**You can find your state legislators and their phone numbers at**  
[whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov/](https://whosmy.viriniageneralassembly.gov/)



The Portsmouth Chapter with Speaker of the House Don Scott



Boris Bluz Rogers



Lacy Watson

### Wytheville Celebrates Dr. King

The Wythe County Chapter and the Millwald Theater hosted the annual march and celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on January 14.

Lacy Watson, a longtime member of Virginia Organizing, was the keynote speaker.

Thanks to the wonderful performers: Boris Bluz Rogers (Emmy Award Winning Poet and Author), Gloria Denise, Glen Allen, and Nakaria Brooks.

And thanks to Bryce Ramey for being the MC and to everyone who came out and marched in the cold to honor Dr. King and stand up for racial justice in America.

## Call to action on climate and housing justice

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is soliciting public ideas for measures that could rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Virginia. They will develop those ideas into a short-term priority action plan that includes projects that would compete for a \$4.3 billion federal implementation fund.

Tell DEQ that we need healthier homes that are energy efficient, mold free, insulated, and climate resilient. Ask them to create a "one-stop shop" that coordinates existing energy efficiency and weatherization programs and future funding to help homeowners and renters make their homes safer and healthier.

Read more and complete the survey here by January 31: <https://www.deq.virginia.gov/our-programs/air/greenhouse-gases/climate-pollution-reduction-grant>



If you're in the mood for something a little lighter, check out this video of board members Del McWhorter and Duane Edwards trying to deliver a lump of coal to Governor Youngkin on December 20 on our YouTube channel VOPVideo. Santa put the governor on the naughty list because of his suppression of voting rights, but to deliver the coal Santa's helpers have to go through security...

## Celebration of Tales | Featured Community Partner

When was the last time you heard a good story? Not as a solitary encounter with a good book or a Netflix binge, but directly from the mouth of another human being? Was it a one-on-one encounter, or were you in the company of others? Did it transport you into the teller's world, their perspective, their worldview? Did it connect you with a community of people beyond yourself, or help you understand the world in a new way, or imagine a different future?

Storytelling is an art common to every culture, and every culture has its own stories that shape reality, teach lessons, and help us understand who we are and our place in the universe. Celebration of Tales, a fiscally sponsored joint plan of work partner with Virginia Organizing, is a once-annual storytelling festival in Charlottesville that showcases tellers and tales that do that work of imagination. It had its first event in the summer of 2023. The festival gives audiences an opportunity to hear stories from across cultures and learn how to spin a good yarn themselves.

Long-time Virginia Organizing supporter, John Alexander, started the festival with the aim of creating a more diverse, inclusive stage, where tellers who have been historically marginalized from white dominated arts spaces can have an opportunity to be heard. According to one participant, the 2023 event was the most diverse festival they'd ever been part of, both in the slate of tellers and audience.

"I believe that humans are naturally storytelling and story demanding," Alexander says. "I don't imagine a future when that will not be true, or a day when a community that appreciates powerful storytelling will not be hungry for a storyteller's gifts and a demand for

the fantastically engaging ways that storytellers teach us how to tell our own stories with ever greater impact."

While stories often are "fantastical," Alexander points out that a good story is also specific and grounded in real-life. As an example, he relates a story about Wovoka, the Paiute prophet who originated the Ghost Dance, a story he learned in written form through *We Survived the End of the World*, by Steven Charleston. Years after the Wounded Knee Massacre ended the Ghost Dance movement and supposedly broke the back of Native American resistance to colonization, Wovoka, the story says, surreptitiously slipped a chunk of red ochre into the pocket of an actor starring in a new Western, whispering, "I will never die." It is a story about a simple act of resistance to erasure. Passed down from teller to teller, it dramatizes the ways Native American movements of rejuvenation persist to this day.

In 2023, the event featured six headline storytellers, workshops, stories for children, and an open mic where amateur storytellers could practice their voice. Even as a once-annual event, the festival is a year-round endeavor requiring hard, intentional effort to achieve its goals and to keep the flywheel turning to propel it from one year to the next.

"I will feel that my mission is accomplished when a storytelling festival is so actively supported in Charlottesville that it seems to organize itself, and the community that supports it enjoys the day and anxiously anticipates the next year's offering," Alexander says.



The first event was sustained by over fifty donors, the energy of over two dozen volunteers, and an audience that exceeded 100 people throughout the day. If you want to be part of the fun in 2024, the next festival will take place on July 13. You can find more information and purchase tickets here. We hope to see you there!

Storytellers pictured here in order are Charmaine Crowell-White, Maria Chavalan (right) with interpreter Adriana Arroyo (left), and Sheila Arnold. Photo credits: Rob Craighurst

## 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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