



# VIRGINIA ORGANIZING

## News from the Grassroots

February 2024 Issue 134

### Making Change in the General Assembly



The Affordable Energy Coalition had a wonderful Energy Justice lobby day on February 6 with 44 attendees and 36 legislator meetings on shared solar and utility shutoff protections.



Newport News/Hampton attended the Fund Our Schools lobby day and met with most of their legislators including Delegate A. C. Cordoza, Delegate Chad Green, Delegate Cia Price, Delegate Shelly Simonds, Delegate Jeion Ward (above), and Senator Mamie Locke!

They spoke with all of them about the urgency of shutoff protections, funding for education, and the housing bills we support.



After the lobby day we held a housing rally in Richmond to call for utility shutoff protections and funding for energy efficiency for all.

Shutoff Protections Bills (Shin - HB 906 and Aird - SB 480) are now identical and include Spanish language access for notices and other improvements. The Senate bill passed the House by a vote of 77-21, and the House bill passed Senate Commerce and Labor unanimously! It has been referred to Senate Finance & Appropriations.

Please keep up the pressure on Governor Youngkin to sign shutoff protections into law. Call his office at 804-786-2211.

The Norfolk Chapter visited the General Assembly on February 20. They met with Senator Angelia Williams Graves and Delegate Bonita Anthony.

Senator Williams Graves introduced them on the floor of the Senate.

They talked with both Sen. Williams Graves and Del. Anthony about the urgency of the housing crisis. So far, five of our top priority bills on housing have passed both chambers!



### Wythe County Chapter Win

Wythe County helped push for funding for a Warming Shelter in Wytheville over the last year.

- They met with several members of Wytheville Town Council,
- attended numerous Town Council meetings,
- spoke at several Council meetings,
- and held a rally to bring attention to the homeless situation in Wytheville.

In January, Wytheville Town Council unanimously voted to fund the Open Door Community to provide temporary shelter until the end of March.

They have also asked Council to budget for a Warming Shelter for future winters. To celebrate their victory, the chapter held a party at a local church on February 17.

# Support our Work on Housing!

A letter from Clio Schurtz, New River Valley Organizer:

When I was 14, I was excited to learn we were moving to Charlottesville, but my heart sank a little when I learned I had the option of sharing my bedroom with the washer and dryer or my brother. I got used to seeing news articles about shootings in the complex featuring photos with my father's car in the background. My mother told me not to walk the dog by myself anymore, and I stopped having friends over, embarrassed by our address and empty fridge.



At the time, I felt isolated by our housing instability, and it's not something I felt comfortable talking about. I have since learned that it is one of the biggest issues facing not only Charlottesville, but the entire state. The stigma, however, persists and insidiously isolates those already experiencing hardship. I grew furious watching rich politicians debate who deserved assistance with housing, never seeming to come to a conclusion that helped anyone. Over the next few years, I figured out how to turn my anger outward, learning about how to move power from the hands of politicians to those of the people.

After graduating from college, I applied to become a community organizer at Virginia Organizing because I have always believed that the power is with the people, not just those with the resources to make themselves heard. In my first six months as an organizer, I have only become more passionate about that belief. I'm working with residents of the New River Valley to ensure that everyone has access to safe, affordable housing not only because of my own experience with housing insecurity, but because it is a story relatable to so many. Along with members of the chapter, I've been tabling at community events to spread the word about our housing campaign, meeting with the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors to discuss much needed home repairs for low-income residents, and building relationships with members of the New River Valley community. The work doesn't stop there, though.

Housing insecurity is a multifaceted issue that requires more than a single solution. In the New River Valley, we're organizing for a whole home repair fund that would allow low-income tenants to repair and remain in homes that already exist, rather than building new ones. In Richmond and Waynesboro, our members are working to implement an adequate rental inspection program in their cities. The Harrisonburg Chapter is bringing people together in a mobile home community to demand better maintenance from the property owners. And we continue to work for legislation at the state level to protect people from evictions, discrimination, homelessness, and ridiculous rent hikes. I am so proud to be part of Virginia Organizing's efforts to make this a reality.

Thank you for being part of Virginia Organizing! Please donate on our website today.

## Op-ed on Housing in Norfolk

Growing up, I lived in the same home for more than 25 years and took for granted the comfort and stability that this foundation afforded me. As I launched my career in public health, I began to think more critically about my positionality: how my identity and upbringing shaped my worldview. Without the security of a stable place to live, my life would have been very different. Circumstances nationwide in recent years have drawn into focus the importance of safe, affordable, and dignified housing.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, several regions of Virginia struggled with high eviction rates and a lack of affordable housing. According to The Eviction Lab, created by Professor Matthew Desmond at Princeton University, Virginia had five of the top 10 cities with the highest eviction rates in the nation; four of those cities were in Hampton Roads (Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk and Chesapeake). Of course, the pandemic exacerbated this.

Additionally, Hampton Roads has the second most unmet need for affordable housing in the state after Northern Virginia. Based on a

2020 review of affordable housing in Virginia by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, Norfolk has the second most unmet need for affordable rental units. This should be deeply troubling to everyone in Norfolk.

When I hear of fellow Norfolk residents who are being affected by this housing crisis, I feel compelled to act. Dominic, a Norfolk resident for three years, works two jobs and lives in a three-bedroom apartment with his wife and children. Due to substantial rent increases, he must move his family to a more affordable place, where, hopefully, the quality and amenities will align with the rent.

Tamika lives in income-based housing. While she had a disability, her rent was approximately \$400, but after recovering from her illness, it skyrocketed to \$1,150. Since she lives in income-based housing, they can change her rent at any time.

These situations are not fair to everyday citizens, and unfortunately these stories and other unjust housing issues have become more common.

The lack of affordable housing is not a temporary problem, and it will likely have generational impacts as women and children are largely affected. Desmond wrote in his book "Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City" that, "If incarceration had come to define the lives of men from impoverished Black neighborhoods, eviction was shaping the lives of women. Poor Black men were locked up. Poor Black women were locked out."

Housing affordability and availability are equity issues, and when the future of already marginalized communities — especially children — are on the line, we must do better. Safe, dignified and affordable housing is a fundamental human right.

This is why Virginia Organizing, a non-partisan statewide grassroots organization, is advocating for affordable housing in Norfolk. There are viable steps that Norfolk City Council can take to move towards more equitable and affordable housing. We need reasonably-priced housing, well-maintained properties and landlord accountability. Options such as housing trust funds, the amplification of community members' collective voices through the creation of a Housing Task Force, and the development of a rental inspection program to ensure property maintenance and landlord accountability can improve our city.

We are excited for the forthcoming report by the Norfolk Department of Housing and Community Development. We hope that officials will take these suggestions into account, and that Norfolk City Council will soon vote to implement measures such as those mentioned above. Everyone deserves to have stable, secure housing, a place of solace, a home. We all must work together to bring that vision to fruition, especially those in leadership positions in this city.

DaShaunda D.H. Taylor, Ph.D., MPH, of Norfolk is a facilitator with Virginia Organizing.



## 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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