

# Our Lives, Our Voices

Virginia Organizing  
Annual Report 2023





In April, Virginia Organizing, along with legislators and partner groups, held a press conference at the Bell Tower in Richmond to protest Governor Glenn Youngkin's voter suppression tactics. In 2023, he stopped automatically restoring voting rights and instead started using secret criteria to evaluate each applicant, slowing restorations down to a trickle. We also discovered (just before the November election) that the Secretary of the Commonwealth removed thousands of eligible people from the voting rolls because of probation violations. This error occurred as a result of the administration choosing to investigate whether people who had had their rights restored had committed felonies afterwards. It is clear they are deliberately keeping people from voting in whatever way they can.

Board member and Fredericksburg Chapter leader Duane Edwards spoke on behalf of all of us when he said, "An individual's civil rights shouldn't be political. For the last 13 years, Virginia had a fluid process for restoration of rights that had clear instructions. Now the governor has closed the door and Virginians don't even know what the process is for getting their rights back."

On the cover of this report is a picture from the March on the Mansion we held during our Grassroots Gathering in September to protest Youngkin's New Jim Crow policies. In December, board members delivered a stocking full of coal to the governor to keep up the pressure.

Photo credit: Graham Moomaw, *Virginia Mercury*



Because you support Virginia Organizing, you know that the core of our work is leadership development. We believe that people who experience oppression are the experts on what needs to change in their communities.

Organizers spend a lot of their time seeking out what we call “one to ones” with people who want to take action about the issues that affect them. These short discussions often lead to a person joining the local chapter and beginning to develop whatever skills they need to speak out. Chapter members work together to decide what issues to work on and share their gifts and experience with each other. The chapter becomes a community where members feel connected and powerful.



Members ask a lot of themselves. They regularly attend not only chapter meetings but city council or school board meetings, strategy sessions, letter to the editor writing workshops, and many other events in order to grow the chapter and win their campaigns. Then they work statewide as well, visiting legislators, telling their stories to media, and coming to our workshops, Power Analysis Weekend, and Grassroots Gathering.

In 2023, our General Assembly work helped to win funding for education and housing. Many chapters sent members to Richmond to meet with their senators and delegates and lobby for our legislative priorities. Members also visited Senator Mark Warner's office and U.S. Representatives Gerry Connolly, Jen Kiggans, and Bobby Scott to talk about economic justice and issues such as medical debt and predatory lending.

We held an online learning series on issues and skills, new member orientations, two regional Dismantling Racism workshops, a regional Grassroots Gathering in Portsmouth, and our first Dismantling Patriarchy workshop. Chapters also held their own forums and trainings, such as the Richmond Chapter's housing law workshops and the candidate forum in Wythe County.

We worked at both the state and federal level on the child care crisis and brought in many new members who are child care providers and want to work on better pay and child care affordability. We continue to have an Environmental Justice Strategy Committee made up of members from many chapters who decide what legislation we will support. This year we added a Housing Justice Strategy Committee, as well, because the housing crisis has become the focus of many of our local campaigns. Each chapter is working on housing in their own way, according to the priorities of their members.

We now have more organizers on staff than we ever have before, and a new chapter is getting started in Halifax County.

That's quite a list, but there's so much more I could tell you about the work **you** have made possible with your support! Thank you for everything you do for Virginia Organizing.

Lily Hungarland  
Chairperson





Our three chapters in Southwest Virginia held a one-day Dismantling Racism Workshop in November. Hampton Roads held theirs in March.

Regional workshops bring in members who aren't able to attend the three-day version and introduce the concepts we believe get to the core of racism.

Systemic racism harms all of us. It's not about personal prejudices but rather the way that our financial institutions and laws have always oppressed people of color and continue to do so.

These workshops are free and include child care and language interpretation.

In October we held a media conference with state partners to support the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), which is threatened by a case before the Supreme Court.

We have supported the CFPB since we campaigned for its creation. Attempts to eliminate it only show how powerful it has been at reining in predatory lending.

Loretta Eaton, a leader in the Norfolk Chapter, spoke to media at the conference and said, "I have been caught in the vicious cycle of trying to pay off a payday loan. It is something nobody should go through. I hope the Supreme Court will do the right thing."



The Eastern Shore Chapter announced their campaign for public funding of well and septic at a media conference in Accomack County in October.



Members of the Harrisonburg Chapter held a meeting in the summer to work on strategy for their campaign for better housing conditions with residents of a local mobile home park.



In Wise County, even before they had official chapter status, leaders took action when a school board member's picture in blackface became public. Several chapter members spoke at school board meetings over a number of months.

After considerable negotiations, the Wise County Public Schools has agreed to offer all staff our Dismantling Racism Workshop. It will be held in 2024.

The new chapter (which became official on Juneteenth, 2023) has also worked on affordable child care and better pay for providers, a drinking fountain in a park in Big Stone Gap, and listening sessions on environmental justice issues throughout Southwest Virginia. They have just begun a campaign on Marcus Alert for Wise County and the City of Norton.



The Danville Chapter began to meet in person again this year with many long-time members and many new faces, too!

They chose to focus on housing issues in the city. Workers can no longer afford to live in Danville due to the impact of the new casino.



# Chapter Highlights

After the **Norfolk Chapter** won \$100 million for upgrades to city infrastructure, they began work on a housing trust fund.

The **Wythe County Chapter** successfully pushed for funding for emergency housing for homeless families.

The **Suffolk Chapter** won expanded hours for bus service throughout the city.

The **Portsmouth Chapter** was able to place three chapter members on the Citizen Advisory Board of the local hospital to improve its mental health programs.

The **New River Valley Chapter** held a forum on Education Justice that was attended by parents, students, teachers, and members of the school administration.

The **Wise County Chapter** began their campaign to make sure communities have a say in whether nuclear reactors will be built in their area.

The **Harrisonburg Chapter** began a campaign with residents of a mobile home park to improve their housing conditions.

The **Richmond Chapter** won several reforms in their Forestbrooke Apartments campaign and made progress towards the city adopting a rental inspection program.

The **Fredericksburg Chapter** won their "All Out for Education in Spotsy" campaign to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ and BIPOC students.

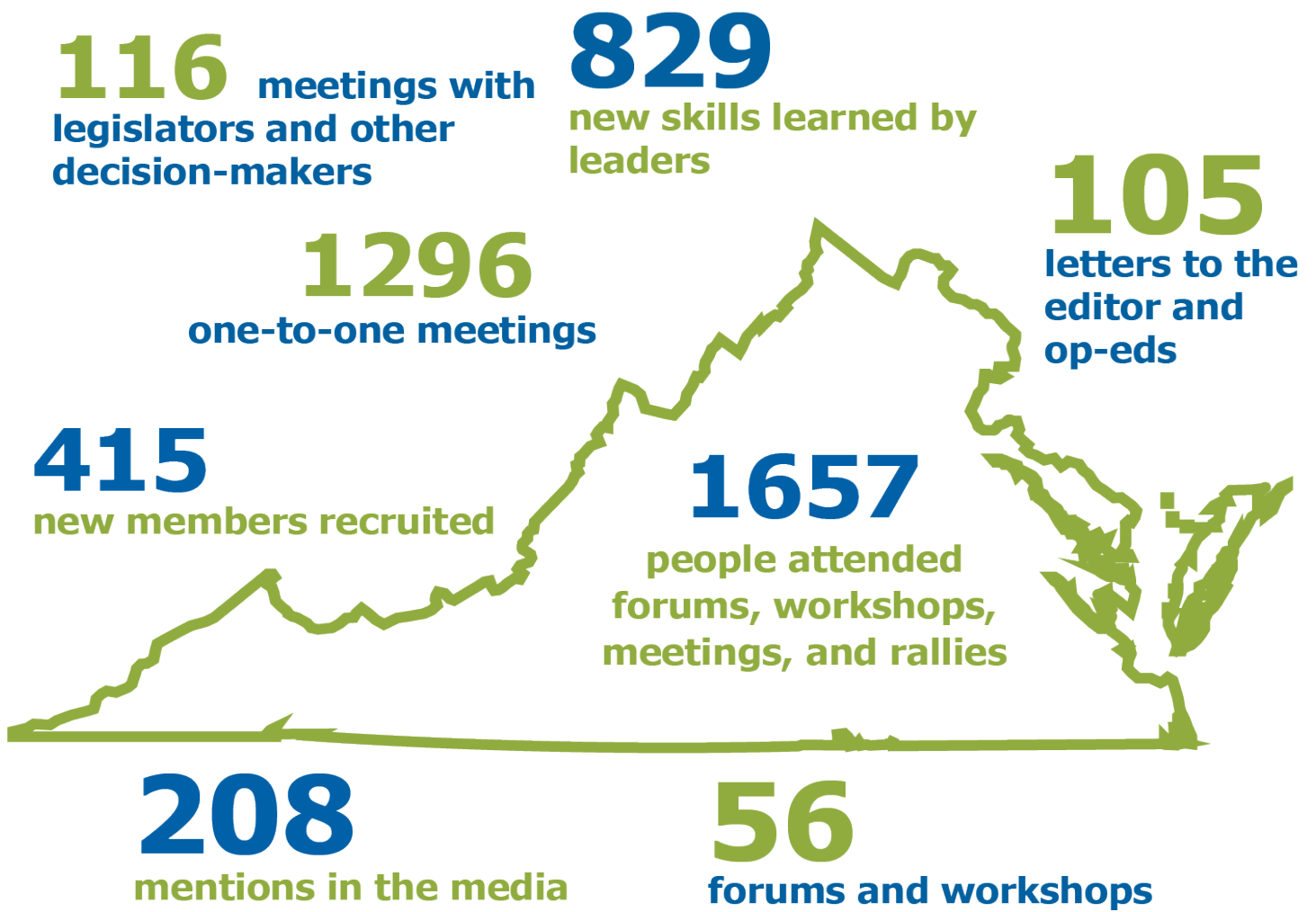
The **Eastern Shore Chapter** began a campaign to call for public funding of well and septic systems in Accomack County.

The **Newport News/Hampton Chapter** continues to work with both city councils to get funding for a shelter on the peninsula for the unhoused.

The **Danville Chapter** began their campaign for subsidized housing.

The **Waynesboro Chapter** held two vigils in local churches for affordable housing and tenant rights with several partner groups.

The **Charlottesville/Albemarle Chapter** wrote letters and made calls to Senator Creigh Deeds about Cover All Kids and utility shutoffs.



In February, we held our first Dismantling Patriarchy workshop in both English and Spanish with a Women’s, Men’s, and Non-binary Caucus. We have also continued to work on abortion and other reproductive rights, child care affordability, and provider pay. Vonita Williams, a leader in the Suffolk Chapter who attended the workshop, wrote a letter to the editor afterwards to say, “I organize with Virginia Organizing to create positive change in our communities. By organizing and advocating for change, we can work towards creating a more just and equitable society.”







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