

2024 Statewide Grassroots Gathering

What a fantastic 2024 Grassroots Gathering this past weekend! We want to thank everyone who attended, participated in, contributed to, and supported the event. We cannot do what we do without all of you!

Over 110 people were in attendance this year, and we hosted 8 workshops across two different time slots. The event also featured a Restoration of Rights panel, chapter accomplishments from the past year, and our very special guest speaker, Congresswoman Jennifer McClellan!



The Restoration of Rights Panel was moderated by State Governing Board Member, Barbara Harris, and featured panel speakers: Sheba Williams, Jenifer Rhame, Shawn Barksdale, Lawrence Howerton, and Johnathan Burman.

Each speaker shared personal stories about their varied experiences with the Restoration of Rights process, and how the work toward a constitutional amendment is necessary and meaningful for returning citizens.

Johnathan Burman accentuated this with the statement, "After we've served our time, our voice should matter." He shared about the challenges of the current process, and closed by stating, "when my time comes, remember my vote will count."

Sheba discussed the emphasis on race that has been observed in the process, the loss of rights for those wrongfully accused, and argued that people need to "fight the fight for people who should have never lost their right to vote." She also highlighted the substantial role of local elections, and that people should exercise their "God-given right to democracy."



Members of the Virginia Organizing State Governing Board with Congresswoman Jennifer McClellan



Restoration of Rights Panel



"Fighting for Mental health and Criminal Justice Reform" Workshop Session



"Healing Justice" Workshop Session

Other speakers noted the limited opportunities that are afforded to returning citizens, and how "alienating them is the opposite of support," as mentioned by Jenifer.

Both Lawrence and Shawn discussed the realities of juvenile convictions, and how some citizens have never had an opportunity to exercise their rights. Lawrence discussed his frustration at that time by stating, "All I wanted was a chance to come home, and pay bills, and vote - be a citizen." Shawn mentioned that it was steps taken after he "changed [his] mindset, changed [his] heart" that led to the eventual restoration of his rights, during a time when the process was more straightforward. This was echoed by Lawrence, who credited a change in mindset for the point at which he "recognized what power was."

Congresswoman Jennifer McClellan delivered a compelling speech about the importance of voting and the impact that each vote can have on our communities and individual lives. She began her speech by thanking Virginia Organizing members for their work in their communities, and by stating that through this organizing, our members "are the backbone of American democracy." Throughout her speech, she emphasized the fact that voting rights are "sacred," and that each person's vote matters. She even shared personal stories of her father and grandfather, and how their experiences influenced her decision to be a lifelong voter and to contribute her voice to each election.

In her talk, Congresswoman McClellan also underscored her dedication as our representative in "fighting efforts to roll back our rights" and "make sure that Virginia remains a leader of expanding democracy for everyone." This includes ending felony disenfranchisement and pushing for restoration of voting rights. She noted that in two years (2020 and 2021), "because of your organizing work, we've moved Virginia from the second hardest state to vote [in] to the eleventh easiest."

She continued with the statement that, the upcoming election is "the most important election of our lives...and every election is the most important one of our lives." She challenged the group not to go backwards and to commit to voting, then responded to the agreement by saying, "On behalf of my ancestors and yours, I thank you for that. Keep up the good work!"

Before and after a catered lunch, we held various workshops. This year's workshops were: Barbershop Series/Civic Engagement, Child Care, Fighting for Mental health and Criminal Justice Reform, Healing Justice, Housing and Tenants' Rights, Rural Organizing, How Environmental Issues Affect Everyday Living, and How to Prepare a Workshop.

Call to Action: The Cheapest and Cleanest Energy is the Energy We Don't Use!

The State Corporation Commission (SCC) is about to decide how much energy and costs our monopoly utilities should be required to save through energy efficiency. The Energy Efficiency Savings Targets the SCC sets for 2026-2028 will determine whether or not our monopoly utilities get serious about energy affordability and reducing carbon emissions. Setting Dominion Energy's standards is up first.

Energy efficiency savings can be a lifeline for households with high energy bills. However, most customers don't know Dominion offers these programs. Lower-income customers, who could benefit the most, are even less aware. And rather than invest more in energy efficiency, which lowers utility costs and brings down bills, Dominion wants to invest less. Tell the SCC not to let Dominion's energy efficiency savings flatline!

Submit written comments here:

<https://scc.virginia.gov/casecomments/comment/PUR-2023-00227>

Our monopoly utilities aren't doing enough to save energy through energy efficiency measures. In 2023, Dominion ranked 45th nationwide for its energy efficiency savings as a percentage of sales. Virginia as a whole ranked 40th out of the 50 states and D.C. for its energy efficiency savings as a percentage of residential electricity sales, with a percentage of only 0.19. The leading state, Rhode Island's percentage was 5.0.

Meanwhile, Dominion is raking in the profits, paying 134% of its profits to shareholders, and even charging its customers the cost of flying its CEO and his family for personal travel on Dominion's private jet. Never mind that Dominion's CEO Robert Blue made \$6.3 million in 2023. Now they want to get away with even fewer energy efficiency savings.

Dominion is capable of reaching much higher levels of energy savings through energy efficiency than they currently are. Their targets for 2026-2028 should increase at a higher rate than their past year's achievements have been.

Tell the SCC you want to save money on your utility bills while making your home safer, healthier, and more comfortable. Tell the SCC you want Dominion to spend your money on increasing its energy efficiency savings, not on costly new power plants that will drive up your bills. And if you're a Dominion customer who didn't know about available energy efficiency savings programs, make sure you let the SCC know. Or if you did know about Dominion's programs but found them confusing, too hard to navigate, or lacking, share your story with the SCC. Remind the SCC that the cheapest and cleanest energy is the energy we don't use! You can submit your comments [here](#) before the October 1 deadline!

For questions or more information, please contact Elisabeth Chaves at elisabeth@virginia-organizing.org.

Richmond Political Education Workshop

The Richmond Chapter has been working closely with a collective of tenant organizing groups in Richmond to create a four-part series of political education workshops this fall. We had our first workshop this month and had nearly 25 people in attendance! Through this series of workshops, we hope to inform tenants about the history of housing conditions, code enforcement, and how we can utilize organizing and legal power to hold slumlords accountable.

Reach out to Rachel at rachelhefner@virginia-organizing.org if you'd like to attend the next workshop!



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Charlottesville Bringing Down Utility Bills Workshop

This month, our Albemarle/Charlottesville Chapter held a workshop to educate residents of a local apartment complex about how energy efficiency measures can bring down energy costs, improve housing conditions, and make homes healthier, safer, and more comfortable. The workshop also covered information about programs and resources that can help to make energy efficiency more accessible. The information highlighted measures to protect lower-income households from high bills as we all transition to cleaner energy.

During the workshop, residents gained knowledge about resources they did not have previous knowledge about, and even brought guests and neighbors with them. Participants had a good discussion to dispel the myth that people with higher utility bills must be using excessive energy, and were surprised to learn about the energy burden disparity between people of color and other groups. They also discussed why it is critical for elected officials to create better shutoff protections and utility company regulations.

Statewide Strategy Committee Updates

Environmental Justice Strategy Committee

This month, the Statewide Environmental Justice Committee met with Delegate Shin's Chief of Staff to discuss a "heat in prisons" bill to hopefully be introduced in the next General Assembly. This bill would ensure that incarcerated folks have access to adequate cooling during extreme heat. Currently, nearly a quarter of Virginia Department of Corrections inmates are in facilities without air conditioning. The committee will be meeting in October to plan its next steps toward this effort.

For more information on how to get involved with the Environmental Justice Strategy Committee, please contact Meghan McNamara at meghan@virginia-organizing.org.

Housing Strategy Committee

Since the General Assembly has been out for the summer, the statewide housing strategy committee has been busy with research and meeting with legislators to craft our statewide priorities for the upcoming year. We are talking with legislators about their priorities and deciding if there is any energy for the issues we care most deeply about such as mold regulations, affordable housing, and tenant protections.

For more information on how to get involved with the Housing Strategy Committee, please contact Rachel Hefner at rachelhefner@virginia-organizing.org.

Restoration of Rights Strategy Committee

The Restoration of Rights Strategy committee has been meeting to develop strategies toward a constitutional amendment to change the process of restoring voting rights in Virginia. The committee has discussed some of the underlying reasons why returning citizens are kept from voting, experiences with being blocked from obtaining further information about the restoration of rights process, and how to begin conversations about voting in local jails. The committee has also set a goal to prepare local barbershop and hair salon workshop sessions to discuss this issue with the community. These workshops would work in tandem with a proposed statewide, weekend-long action to bring more awareness to restoration of rights and why the General Assembly needs to pass a constitutional amendment.

For more information on how to get involved with the Restoration of Rights Strategy Committee, please contact Glenda Crockett-Eans at glcrockett-eans@virginia-organizing.org or Tony Jones at tjones@virginia-organizing.org.

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

Leader of the Month

We are bringing back our Leader of the Month, and what better way to do that than to highlight TWO of our chapter leaders who have risen to the occasion! This month, we are featuring our very own Brandy Faulkner and Aaron Easter for their work with VO.

Brandy Faulkner - New River Valley

Brandy has recently been highlighted as one of our newest State Governing Board members, and now we would like to show our appreciation for her recent work as a chapter leader.

She is a member of the New River Valley Chapter and, in lieu of a current organizer, has been leading chapter meetings and serving as a contact person for the chapter. In addition to her local work, she is also a member of the Environmental Justice Strategy Committee, and recently was one of the committee members to meet with Senator Aird's office about the proposed bill to address the need for heating and cooling in Virginia prisons. This past weekend, Brandy co-led the "Rural Organizing" workshop at our 2024 Grassroots Gathering and spoke before the gathering to close out the event. Thank you for all that you do to help us continue the work of Virginia Organizing, Brandy!



Aaron Easter - Newport News

Aaron is a valued member of the Newport News/Hampton Chapter. He has consistently attended chapter meetings and has regularly participated in chapter events, City Council meetings, actions, and activities.

He is also a member of the Environmental Justice Strategy Committee, and he presented the chapter's accomplishments at the Southeast Regional Grassroots Gathering in June. Aaron has facilitated chapter meetings with the Newport News City Council to address housing issues and community outreach, spoken about local issues to students at Christopher Newport University, and has written two Letters to the Editor this year. Most recently, he co-led the "How Environmental Issues Affect Everyday Living" workshop at the 2024 Grassroots Gathering this past weekend. We appreciate your dedication progressing the work of the Newport News/Hampton Chapter and the work of Virginia Organizing as a whole, Aaron!

