



News from the Grassroots

February 2025 Issue 146

March for Working Families



On February 17, we marched through the streets of Richmond alongside partner organizations to advocate for the rights of working families. Hundreds of supporters attended to bring awareness to issues like housing, voting rights, immigrant rights, union rights, and education. The group also rallied by the bell tower as speakers uplifted these issues, including Brandy Faulkner, of the VO State Governing Board, who spoke about Restoration of Rights.

"The right to vote is so fundamental to a functioning democracy," said Brandy. She continued on to share her disapproval of felony disenfranchisement by stating, "Losing [the] right to vote because of a felony conviction is harsh. Continuing to be treated as a second-class citizen, denied that right to vote, even after serving your time, is unacceptable."

Throughout her speech, Brandy presented facts and statistics to demonstrate the racial imbalance and inequity of felony conviction laws, and how Virginia is the only state where the governor has the sole power to restore voting rights - a law that we have been adamantly lobbying to change.



"I'm very proud of the Virginia General Assembly for taking a critical step this session to pass a constitutional amendment that restores the right to vote after those convicted of felonies have completed their sentences. A restoration of rights would mean that every person who has paid their debt to society can reimagine themselves as human beings who are capable of participating meaningfully in our system's processes."

One speaker spoke about the need for housing justice, strong unions, and good jobs, while other speakers spoke on the importance of equity in education and justice for all people groups. The rally also featured group chants, songs, and a spoken word presentation.

Boaz Young-El, Organizing Director for New Virginia Majority, closed out the rally by sharing that "real change happens when we take this power back to our communities." He implored the group to remember that the work continues even after the rally ends. "Today we marched, but tomorrow we organize," said Boaz.

Thank you to everyone who participated in amplifying all of our voices and building power with us. Let's keep building toward a better Virginia for all!

Know Your Rights Workshops

Our chapters have been preparing and holding Know Your Rights Workshops designed to provide information for immigrant communities to know what rights they have and how to respond if those rights are challenged. Our Fredericksburg and Williamsburg Chapters have each held a workshop since the beginning of the year, with engagement from directly affected groups and community supporters. Moving forward, more of our chapters will be holding similar workshops for our communities, including another upcoming workshop in Fredericksburg and a workshop in Harrisonburg.

For more information about Know Your Rights workshops in your area, please contact your local organizer.



Fredericksburg Know Your Rights Training,
January 23, 2025.

2025 General Assembly

Chapter Lobby Visits - Throughout the 2025 General Assembly session, our chapters met with legislators to communicate our legislative priorities and advocate for specific bills. We were very happy to see our chapters were represented in Richmond and in individual meetings from a distance. Not only did we have members return to the General Assembly from previous years, but we also had a number of first-time session attendees!



General Assembly End - We are thankful for each legislator who took the time to meet with our chapters and who voted in support of the policies that we support. Three hundred and eighty bills (380) were sent to the governor, and we tracked several priorities throughout the session. The governor can sign or veto bills, let them become law without his signature, or offer amendments. He has until March 24 to take action.

Below are some of our priority wins:

Constitutional Amendments

- We are particularly thrilled to celebrate the success of the three constitutional amendments that were passed to support restoration of rights ([SJ 248](#)), reproductive freedom ([SJ 247](#)) and marriage equality ([SJ 249](#)). Now we can begin to plan for the next session and help get legislators who will support these amendments in 2026 elected this fall!

HB2195 (McQuinn & Wilt): protect families from inadequate mold remediation

- The bill passed both chambers unanimously and should get the governor's signature!

HB1935/SB777 (LeVeré Bolling/Locke): provide all income-qualifying families with energy efficiency retrofits by 2033

- The House bill passed the Senate by a vote of 21-18, while the Senate bill passed the House by a vote of 73-21. We're hoping there was enough bipartisan support along the way for both bills to get the governor's signature.
- Additionally, the compromise budget includes \$20,000 to implement the task force.

HB1894 (Seibold): provide incarcerated folks access to adequate cooling during extreme heat

- The bill passed and will head to the governor's desk! While the bill itself was watered down, the budget conferees added \$25 million to the budget to install air conditioning at prisons, starting with Nottoway!

In fairly historic news, the General Assembly unanimously passed the Campaign Integrity Act that will prevent lawmakers from spending campaign funds on personal uses. Virginia is one of the last states in the country to ban campaign funds spending on personal use. Let's hope the governor signs this one.

Virginia State Budget - The House and Senate also released their compromise budget on Thursday and then voted to pass it on Saturday. The budget proposal was passed 81-18 in the House and 27-3 in the Senate.

The Commonwealth Institute provides a helpful breakdown of the budget [here](#). You can also get the highlights from the [Virginia Mercury](#) and [Cardinal News](#). And you can find more discussion of the budget below where I discuss how our priorities fared.

The General Assembly will reconvene on April 2 to consider the governor's proposed bill changes and to finalize the budget.

Our biggest health care priority this session was to see the General Assembly take action on anticipated federal funding cuts to Medicaid expansion. Virginia has a "trigger" in effect that will automatically disenroll people included in Medicaid coverage through Medicaid expansion when the federal government cuts funding below its 90% support level. This is likely to happen but not certain to. Unfortunately, despite the Senate including language in the budget to address this potential situation, the budget compromise did not contain any provision to address or remove the trigger. However, Democrats have already announced that they will use a special session to address any federal funding cuts, including cuts to Medicaid. You can read more about that [here](#) and [here](#).

Call to action! [Contact your Member of Congress](#) and ask for "no cuts to Medicaid!"

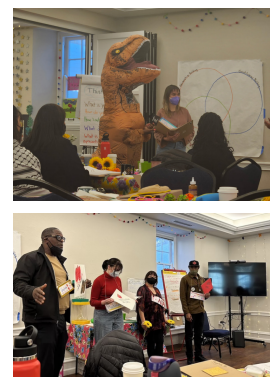
First Williamsburg Interest Meeting

Our newly-formed Williamsburg Chapter held their first interest meeting at the beginning of February. Members of the community were in attendance, and the event generated interest and enthusiasm for chapter work in the area. The chapter has already begun taking action on current issues in the community, including writing letters-to-the-editor to address those needs.

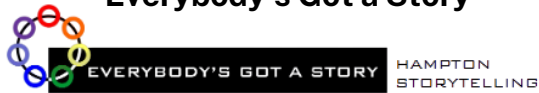
The chapter will hold another interest meeting on March 1 in Williamsburg. Please contact Meghan McNamara for more information about the interest meeting at meghan@virginia-organizing.org.

Movement Matters Organizing Institute Training

At the end of last month, five of our organizing staff members attended the Movement Matters Organizing Institute in DC. Throughout the training, they learned theoretical and practical skills for organizing, focusing on relationship building, constituency building, and power building. We are thankful for opportunities to grow as better organizers to strategically and effectively serve our communities!



Featured Community Partner - Everybody's Got a Story



Jay Johnson has been a fixture of Virginia Organizing from nearly the beginning, having joined the State Governing Board before there was even a chapter in Hampton, where she grew up. Now retired and in her mid-80's, she recently stepped down from the Board, but she isn't exactly slowing down. As the co-founder of Everybody's Got A Story, she has recently found a way to turn a budding passion for storytelling into a new way to organize.

The new endeavor began in 2022, when Jay showed up at a storytelling workshop led by Sheila Arnold. Arnold declared Jay to be a natural and encouraged her to keep honing her craft. Jay saw how storytelling could be a way to build bridges of communication across diverse, often divided communities in her area, and wanted to do something about it.

"I told Sheila I wasn't getting any younger, and we need to do it now and not in two years," Jay says. With seed funding from Jay's college roommate, they hosted the first festival in Hampton that year, with Virginia Organizing as fiscal sponsor.

The event intentionally draws storytellers from diverse cultural backgrounds. One teller brings listeners into the wrenching experience of a Black family losing its access to land during Reconstruction. An Indigenous teller entrances audiences with snatches of music and song. A teller from the mountains weaves audiences into the tapestry of Appalachian folklife.

"It's important for people to hear from folks who are different from themselves, but who have commonalities in their stories," Jay explains.

For the first two years, Everybody's Got A Story was an annual event. But Jay has a long-term vision for cultural change in her community, and that means expanding the festival's reach and impact. Starting in the fall of 2024 they began hosting monthly events featuring a different storyteller each month. They have also begun holding story swaps on the third Saturday of every month, in which new and experienced tellers share their work and get feedback from their peers. In 2025 they plan to host two storytelling academies.

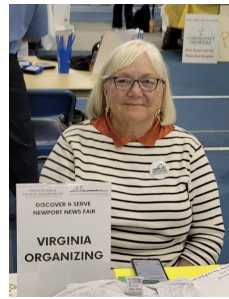
As an organizer, Jay is always sizing up the people she meets for a role in the work, and there is plenty of work to do. Everybody's Got A Story prides itself on booking some of the best storytellers in the business, and showcases artists from well outside the state. To afford the best talent, she has been making connections with the business community across Hampton Roads and is looking for volunteers to help with things like fundraising, media relations, and web design.

This year's festival will take place July 17-20, and you can visit their website to learn more and explore ways to get involved.



Leader of the Month

Gerry Ellis - Newport News/Hampton Chapter



Gerry has been a contributing leader in our Newport News/Hampton Chapter for several years. She is actively engaged with campaigns on Christopher Newport University's campus, leading annual tabling events for the Spring Volunteer Fair (hosted by CNU). In December 2024, Gerry collected

54 postcards of support for a regional shelter at her church during the chapter's housing campaign.

"Her family, faith and community is greatly important to her and impacted by her compassion and leadership," said chapter organizer, Sarah Miller.

She is married with children and grandchildren and serves with passion and diligence.

"It is a great organization and I talk to people all the time about it, said Gerry."

Gerry shared that her work with the chapter has "encouraged [her] to be more engaged, civically" and has "pushed [her] a little," like taking action to write letters-to-the-editor. She also expressed that she enjoys working with her fellow chapter memb

Virginia Organizing
703 Concord Avenue
Charlottesville, VA 22903
434-984-4655
info@virginia-organizing.org
www.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