



Virginia Organizing: Tirelessly advocating for social justice

Social justice may be defined as "empowerment of people to participate fully in the economic, social, and cultural life of a nation." It is the pursuit of justice and equity for populations who are marginalized, exploited, disempowered, or violated based on their social group membership. The pursuit of social justice involves working to dissolve the many "isms" of injustice and oppression.

Since its formation in 1995 Virginia Organizing has been out front in the grassroots drive to challenge injustices. The group has influenced hosts of social-justice triumphs and advancements affecting Virginia residents. It is headquartered in Charlottesville. The South Hampton Roads Chapter is one of 19 across the state, including ODU and six other campus chapters. It is nonprofit and nonpartisan.

Formerly known as Virginia Organizing Project, it operates by empowering people in local communities to directly address issues that affect the quality of their lives. "We especially encourage the participation of those who have traditionally had little or no voice in our society," said Teresa Stanley, South Hampton Roads chapter organizer, whose role is similar to that of a coordinator.

She also noted that Virginia Organizing has succeeded in doing what previous organizing efforts in Virginia failed to do. "We have created a statewide, multi-issue, diverse, membership-driven organization with staying power."

She adds, "One of our greatest accomplishments is that diversity is at the core of

everything we do." Also at the organization's core is the belief that all people should be treated fairly and with dignity in all aspects of life, regardless of race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, ability or country of origin.

The issues are complex, and many overlap. They affect the lives of many thousands of Virginia residents. By building relationships and partnering with diverse individuals and groups throughout the state, Virginia Organizing enhances their ability to work together at the statewide level, democratically and non-violently, for change.

Statewide, more than 3,000 people have attended their workshops, trainings, and forums. Events such as Social Justice Univer-

sity, sponsored by Virginia Organizing and the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, help educate people about important issues in their community.

This year's "university," in Virginia Beach, focused on the local effects of immigration, uranium mining, predatory lending, health care and the budget. "The main idea is to empower people with the information so they can talk about these things with their legislators," said Mike Stark, a local Virginia Interfaith Center leader.

After the event, participants succeeded in scheduling meetings with all 20 South Hampton Roads legislators, building relationships and providing essential information on the issues. More than 40 local residents traveled to the General Assembly in Richmond on January 22 to follow up on the meetings and hold legislators accountable.

The chapter has created issue teams so that individuals can address their specific passions while standing in solidarity and supporting each other on all issues chapter supporters have agreed on. Many members work on multiple issues.

Debra Grant serves on the three-person Chapter Leadership Team and focuses on voter participation/restoration of voting rights. A disabled former certified nursing assistant, Ms. Grant is a Housing Choice Voucher Program recipient (Section 8).

She is also president of her neighborhood

civic league, and she sits on the boards of Virginia Poverty Law Center, Legal Services Corporation, STOP, and the Interfaith Alliance of Virginia Beach.

"My family members call me a professional volunteer," she said. "But I'm helping myself, too. I've learned that you don't have to be a lawyer or even a professional to help people; you just have to be willing and be educated on the issues."

In 2008 and 2012 Ms. Grant led voter registration drives across the area. One success she's proud of is helping two women ages 96 and 103 vote by absentee ballot.

More recently she's been working to outlaw predatory lending, prevalent near her Lake Edward neighborhood. "There are five or more payday loan businesses on Newtown Road but no grocery store and only one bank," she noted.

The group scored a huge victory in Chesapeake in February when Chesapeake City Council passed a requirement for predatory loan stores to get conditional use permits before locating or relocating in the city of Chesapeake. The public will be able to comment on whether they should get the permits.

Yvonne Lewis of Virginia Beach is a longtime member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority who joined Virginia Organizing in 2004. She is the sorority's state chair for Social Action and a member of its Joint Social Action

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Virginia Organizing file photos, from left:

Supporters urge citizens to divest their financial holdings from big banks and move them to local banks and credit unions that support the community.

Participants at Social Justice University in Virginia Beach, sponsored by Virginia Organizing and the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy to help educate people about important issues.

Broken Hearts at the General Assembly: On Valentine's Day, more than 100 Virginia Organizing supporters, including local members, expressed their disappointment with the General Assembly's emphasis on partisanship and ideology instead of kitchen table issues like the economy and education.

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tion Committee.

Her work with Virginia Organizing on restoration of rights meshes almost seamlessly with that for the sorority. She points out that only Virginia and Kentucky permanently disenfranchise all felons, requiring an act of the governor to restore voting rights. Virginia's policy, she notes, is a vestige from the Jim Crow era and was a product of the 1901 Constitutional Convention, deliberately designed to marginalize people of color.

Sandra A. Cook, Virginia Organizing's board chair, is also a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

Tim McCarthy is a retired clinical social worker who's passionate about social justice. Before joining Virginia Organizing four years ago, he had been a community volunteer for many years. Mr. McCarthy served as president of Light Rail Now, a group responsible for much of the effort behind the light rail referendum.

As a Chapter Leadership Team member, he also works on other issues, including affordable housing, voting rights, and immigration reform. Additionally, he works on Medicaid expansion.

Winston Whitehurst, leader of the Affordable Health Care Coalition for South Hampton Roads, has been collaborating with Virginia Organizing since 2009 when he began working to get the Affordable Care Act passed. He made presentations to city

councils, asking them to pass resolutions in favor of Medicaid expansion, and he met with legislators at the General Assembly to explain the benefits of expansion.

They've secured a unanimous decision from the Virginia Beach City Council to pass a resolution urging the Virginia General Assembly to expand Medicaid in Virginia.

"We have to continue to work for affordable health care, equity and justice in all areas of social and economic justice," he said. "I agree with Franklin Roosevelt that we can't be a great nation if we don't take care of those who are sick and in poverty."

Retired high school history teacher Ken Ehrenthal was instrumental in forming the chapter and now works primarily on issues surrounding economic justice.

He explained that there are two kinds of Medicaid funding: one that's paid to nursing homes for long-term care, and one that pays for the medical needs of poor people. The expansion for seniors, affecting two-thirds of the funding, has already passed, "but the governor is waffling on the second part, which accounts for only a third of the funds."

He further explained that, "Virginia taxpayers are already paying for it, but if we don't take the money, it will go somewhere else."

Mr. Ehrenthal is also part of a team investigating the structure of Virginia's tax system, with the goal of developing some new approaches. He says the system is notori-

ously skewed towards the wealthy.

The dearth of affordable housing in Hampton Roads is another major concern. In 2010 an effort was underway in Chesapeake to rezone Providence Mobile Home Park for construction of condos, displacing the park's 170 low-income families.

With help from Virginia Organizing's Affordable Housing Team, led by Rev. Lauren Cogswell-Ramseur and Kathy Stanley, residents scored a major victory when the rezoning request was denied. "We organized the residents, got them to come out and find their voices and stand up for their rights," Teresa Stanley said.

Members of Virginia Organizing participate in BEACH (Bringing an End to all City Homelessness), a Virginia Beach community partnership. And they worked behind the scenes to help bring about more SROs (single room occupancies), including one that recently opened in Chesapeake and one that's been approved for Virginia Beach.

Mr. McCarthy noted that they're working with the City of Virginia Beach to develop a housing resource center, which they hope will include some emergency housing.

Because of the President's DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) executive order, high school student Linda Peña will be able to get a higher education. But for thousands of others, the issue remains unsettled.



THE ISSUES:

Anti Discrimination

- Elimination of the Death Penalty

- End Racial Profiling

Budget and Tax Reform

Civic Engagement

- Restoration of Rights

- Ending voter suppression

Economic Justice

Environment

Health Care

Immigration Reform

Predatory Lending

Small Business

Social Security

The South Hampton Roads Chapter meets every other month at 7 p.m. at Thalia United Methodist Church, 4321 Virginia Beach Boulevard in Virginia Beach.

The next meeting is Monday, May 13

Meanwhile, Linda has joined Virginia Organizing and is working to bring about fair and balanced immigration reform. "Virginia Organizing is all about helping the community, and I love working with them," she said.

Statewide numbers tell more of the organization's story:

- Led 182 different workshops, trainings, and forums for 3,579 people
- Organized 81 direct actions with 1,913 participants
- Met with 1,231 people one-to-one to discuss issues in the community and grassroots organizing
- Helped 1,257 new people become active in their local communities
- Supervised and trained 31 interns
- Conducted 86 consultations with other groups
- Registered 3,465 voters and assisted with 36 restoration of rights applications
- Made more than 125,000 nonpartisan get-out-the-vote and issue-education phone bank calls
- Knocked on about 3,500 doors.

The quest for social justice for all, in America and in Virginia, is arduous and never ending but well worth the effort for those affected. Members of the community are invited to get involved. For more information: www.virginia-organizing.org or tstanley@virginia-organizing.org.

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