

State Governing Board

Kathy Rowles, Chairperson

Janice “Jay” Johnson, Vice-Chairperson

Tracey Parker, Secretary

Andy Kegley, Treasurer

Ed Clark, Virginia Forest Watch

Holly Farris, Wythe County Chapter

Norka Gonzales, Tenants’ and Workers’
Support Committee

Jason Guard, Richmond Peace Education
Center

McDonald Johnson, Wythe County Chapter

Laura Lawson, Lee County Chapter

Tenise Monterio, Lynchburg Chapter

Audrey Oliver, Public Housing Association of
Residents

Danielle Poux, At-large Member, Alexandria

Robert Salyer, Wise County Chapter

Jim Schuyler, Equality Virginia

Denise Smith, At-large Member, Rocky Gap

Faye Smith, Amherst County Chapter

Sherri Smith, Virginia Health & Environment
Project

Maura Ubinger, Appalachian Peace Education
Center

Kristi Williams, Hampton Chapter

Helen Witt, Amherst County Chapter

Mission Statement

The Virginia Organizing Project (VOP) is a statewide grassroots organization dedicated to challenging injustice by empowering people in local communities to address issues that affect the quality of their lives. As a non-partisan organization, VOP especially encourages the participation of those who have traditionally had little or no voice in our society. By building relationships with diverse individuals and groups throughout the state, VOP strives to get them to work together, democratically and non-violently, for change.



VOP Staff: Jill Carson, Organizer; Brian Johns, Organizer; Michele Mattioli, Grassroots Fundraising Coordinator; Janice May, Foundation Grants Coordinator; Laura Ramirez, Office Manager; Ellen Ryan, Lead Organizer; Joe Szakos, Executive Director; Ben Thacker-Gwaltney, Organizer; Steve Vaughan, Communications Coordinator; and, Cathy Woodson, Organizer

VOP Consultants: Hisham Ashur, Judy Bartlett, Frank Blechman, Don Giecek and David Rubinstein

VOP Interns: Mariel Abbitt, Sarah Arnason, Tom Benner, Meghan Blackman, LaToya Brackett, Ellen Brown, Azzurra Cox, Jesse Davie-Kessler, Alex Davis, Emily Duke, Lamar Glover, Nicholas Graber-Grace, Andrew Holden, Alison Jost, Paula Leff, Kathryn McKinney, Tracy Monson, Maria Morelli and Adam Turner

Message from the Chairperson

My first experience with the Virginia Organizing Project was when I participated in a one-to-one discussion regarding the changes I wanted to see in my community. That was six years ago now, and, in those years, I have participated in a process that has given me the opportunity to see changes in ways I would never before have dreamed possible.

2002 has been a very exciting year at VOP. We have celebrated some significant outcomes that have been several years in the making. We kicked the year off by seeing hundreds of millions of dollars allocated by the Virginia Housing Development Authority to finance low-income homeownership and rental housing construction loans. VOP followed this accomplishment with a strategic effort to restore voting rights to former felons and to make their application process more responsive. After just a few months of carefully executed organizing, we received word that the governor would make major changes to the rights restoration process. These changes went into effect in September. The year closed with a request from a group in Petersburg for VOP Chapter status, thus allowing us to continue to expand.

These campaigns and the continued overall development of a grassroots base that is representative of Virginia's diversity are bringing about the fulfillment of our mission to "empower people in local communities." It has been exciting to be a part of seeing the incredible development that VOP is fostering in communities across the state and the difference VOP is making in the lives of people benefiting from the policy changes.

The Virginia Organizing Project is working against some long-standing challenges brought on by systems that benefit some while disadvantaging many, by a geography that has been used to separate and isolate in order to maintain the dominant voice, and by new challenges of state budget deficits and

new demands that present difficulties for Virginia's local governments. As a result of our efforts, we are seeing people come together to face these challenges and work diligently and purposefully toward positive changes.

In this report, you will find an overview of the work that has been done over the year, work that has produced the achievements made. We are proud of the talents of our professional staff and the dedication of many, many VOP leaders. In 2002, more than ever, VOP has shown that we are here for the long haul, tackling issues ranging from low wages to racism to the environment to tax reform to LGBT issues. We are setting goals that will provide lasting solutions.

I am glad to be a part of this story and look forward to another year of working together with a growing group of diverse residents across the state. I am hopeful that, through our efforts, we will continue to see changes happening in Virginia, changes that make a difference.

-- Kathy Rowles
VOP Chairperson



Statewide Campaigns

Statewide issue campaigns have been strategic in their focus and help build VOP's credibility and power. Identifying issues requiring state policy changes that benefit and involve all regions of Virginia is a powerful way for VOP to build the capacity of the organization.

Affordable Housing Campaign

Virginia Housing Development Authority (VHDA) approved **more than \$339 million** to finance low-income homeownership and rental construction loans and set up a three-member creative financing team to work with local governments, non-profit organizations and developers to find new and more effective strategies to address low-income homeownership and rental needs throughout the state. Also, VOP and its affiliates were successful in getting VHDA to open up its public comment process and open its doors to legally documented immigrants (formerly, only immigrants with permanent resident status qualified for VHDA loans).



Criminal Justice Issues

VOP played a critical role in getting the governor to make **major changes to the**

voting rights restoration process. Governor Warner agreed to reduce the application form from 13 pages to one page for former non-violent felons, replaced the five- to seven-year waiting period with a three-year waiting period, and promised that applicants will receive a response within six months of submitting an application where, previously, no time limit had been set.

VOP is currently focusing on support for legislation dealing with issues of **racial profiling.** Legislation would require each local and state police officer, during the course of official duties, to collect certain information pertaining to traffic stops, including race, ethnicity, color, age and gender of the alleged traffic offender, and to record the specific reason for the stop, whether the person was interrogated, charged or arrested, and whether a citation or warning was issued. It must also indicate the specific traffic violation committed.

Living Wage Campaigns

To date, VOP and its affiliates have succeeded in securing living wage ordinances in Alexandria and Charlottesville, increasing wages for hundreds of low-wage workers. In addition, VOP has supported living wage efforts in many other communities. In VOP's first private employer campaign, 107 consecutive weeks of protesting every Friday afternoon outside the Courtyard By Marriott in Charlottesville has resulted in the Mayor of Charlottesville working with local hotel operators and Piedmont Virginia Community College to link job training with increased wages. Working with the Virginia Education Association, local churches, college students and low-wage workers, VOP will continue to expand these efforts in various parts of the state. VOP is pleased that more and more people are getting active in living wage campaigns.



Tax Reform

In conversations, meetings and workshops with a wide range of constituencies over the past seven years, VOP has been struck by the need in Virginia for a more equitable tax structure that will supply adequate revenue. A national study released earlier this year by the Center on Budget Policy and Priorities ranked Virginia as one of the harshest tax states for working class and working poor families. The study estimated that a single-parent family of three earning \$17,661 would owe \$483 in

Virginia income taxes – the fourth highest figure in the nation, behind Kentucky, Hawaii and Alabama. At the same time, legislators spent most of the 2002 General Assembly dealing with a \$4 billion deficit. Many services were cut or eliminated, leaving local governments scrambling to make up for the decrease in state revenue. Recently, the governor announced the need to trim another \$2 billion from the budget. Several commissions appointed by the legislature or the governor have made sound recommendations on changes to the tax system, but very, very few have been implemented. VOP's multi-constituency approach gives the organization a strategic position to help push for needed changes to happen. A strategy team is working together, and the effort of building organizational allies and seeking legislative allies is underway. VOP's goals are to **bring justice** to the state income tax structure, **eliminate unfair exemptions** in the sales tax and corporate income tax, work on ways to **assist local governments** and **weed out inefficiency** in Virginia's state budget.

Building Local Chapters

VOP's organizers balance work on statewide campaigns and leadership development with work on local issues. Statewide campaigns are important to building local chapters. They offer increased visibility and ways for local residents to connect to a larger audience and to learn more about how policies affect different regions of the state. Below are some examples of how VOP chapters have made tangible changes in their communities in 2002.

Amherst County VOP Chapter

Since Amherst County is a rural county which includes the state-recognized Monacan Nation, the racial makeup in this county is diverse. This year, a small group of residents

has continued to build on its beginning in 2001. The chapter studied the school system's suspension to determine whether or not it supports a racial bias. Their conclusion was that the county is implementing the process fairly. Later in the year, the chapter submitted a request to State Senator Steve Newman asking him to introduce legislation in the 2003 General Assembly session to officially name the bridge crossing the James River on the new US-29 bypass the Monacan Bridge. They have received a positive response and will follow this in the coming year. In addition, leaders have chosen to address issues related to minority hiring in the county government and school system.

Hampton VOP Chapter

Also in its second year as a full VOP chapter, the Hampton Chapter has worked on building the grassroots base in their community. Looking for those who are serious about working on issues, learning how to conduct one-to-one conversations with community members and other basic tools of organizing, and assessing the power dynamics in Hampton have been among the activities emphasized this year.

From their involvement in the statewide affordable housing campaign, chapter members have learned more about how to make a local impact that will use allocated funds to improve the quality of life in Hampton. In November, the chapter held an affordable housing forum directed at increasing the understanding of how these issues are related. The chapter agreed to continue working on local affordable housing issues, focusing on the funded housing programs that are under-utilized by community members and making existing systems usable for local people.

Lee County VOP Chapter Wise County VOP Chapter

Lee County and Wise County VOP Chapters had a very good year in 2002. The two neighboring counties in rural southwest Virginia met together for regular meetings and training events. As a result, the group has seen an increase in participation and leadership development.

While actively involved in the campaign for restoration of voting rights to former felons, these chapters held a community training event on assisting former felons through the application process for restoring voting rights. This event raised the awareness of the group and saw an increase in participation and interest.

Through VOP efforts, chapter members were able to participate in the strategic

planning for the campaign. They connected with government offices in Richmond, including participation in a media conference and a meeting with the governor's staff, which led to a positive action from the governor's office. Chapter leaders also assisted with writing scripts for media events and public service announcements and had representation in a meeting with Lt. Governor Tim Kaine.

Another exciting local development involved work with adapting the meeting formats to fit the cultural style of this Appalachian area. The chapters have developed a social gathering style that is carefully organized with workshop sessions on issues identified through conversations between leaders and community residents. As a result of these gatherings, the chapters have identified a new issue and are working on a local campaign focusing on the upcoming 2003 school board elections. Their goal is to increase diversity in the representation of elected officials. Both chapters are involved in increasing voter registration and assisting with voter education. Building on their experience with statewide campaigns, the group has created a "fact sheet" on campaign issues carefully crafted to be informative and non-divisive. Public forums are also being planned.

Lynchburg VOP Chapter

Lynchburg VOP Chapter had some exciting local victories in 2002. In their first local issue campaign, Lynchburg City Schools changed the long-term suspension policy from a mandatory 365-day suspension to one that offers appropriate alternative education and counseling. Along the way, endorsements were secured from across Lynchburg, including the Virginia Education Association/District 12/CenVaServe Board, World Outreach Committee of First Christian Church, Lynchburg Youth Prevention Services Board, Unity in the Seven Hills congregation, Lynchburg Peace Education Center, Virginians Organizing Toward Equality,

Citizens for Fairness and Equality, and the Lynchburg Depressive Disorders Association.

An additional achievement was realized as they worked together to push the Lynchburg City Council to remove racist artwork from public properties. The brass relief at the Circuit Court building was particularly offensive, as it depicted black slaves with faces like chimpanzees. Such artwork could only intimidate and denigrate Lynchburg area citizens who come trusting in the objectivity of the court system. The chapter succeeded in having this artwork removed. The public reaction to this change was very positive and brought the support of other community organizations. As a result of the increased community support, another offensive structure in the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court building has been completely covered by an American flag.

With these accomplishments in place, the chapter has set a goal to push for fencing on a high bridge where persons suffering from depression often end their lives. VOP Chapter leaders are also involved in researching local living wage issues.

Petersburg VOP Chapter



In the early months of 2002, VOP conducted one-to-one conversations with over 110 residents in the Petersburg area in the preliminary work of exploring the potential for

chapter development. A first meeting of key people wanting to organize a chapter was held in May. By fall, the group had doubled in size.

In November, a *Dismantling Racism* workshop was held. At the end of the day, participants were able to devote some time to examining dynamics specific to Petersburg and identifying who currently has power in this community.

A diverse cross-section of the community has come together to talk about local and state issues. As the year closed, Petersburg residents are making new relationships with other community organizations, official chapter status has been requested, and excitement about the work in Petersburg is growing.

Wythe County VOP Chapter

While the Wythe County VOP Chapter has been active during the last year in the statewide affordable housing and tax reform campaigns, leaders have maintained a local focus on issues of living wages. Working closely with two other community groups, the Roundtable on Poverty (ROP) and the Concerned Citizen's Network (CCN), VOP leaders are in an initial strategic planning phase of a local living wage campaign. In addition to one-to-one conversations and making public comments, the chapter held its first annual awards ceremony dedicated to recognizing local businesses that pay a living wage. As a result of this event, VOP attracted the attention of other employers in Wytheville.

As the year closes, chapter leaders continue to build on the collaborative work with ROP and CCN through further discussions about the power dynamics in Wythe County and the most effective way to work together on issues of common interest.

Organizational Development

Media Development

Over the past year, VOP's achievements in diversifying and intensifying use of media included the coordination of media conferences in campaigns for the restoration of voting rights, tax reform, living wages and removal of racial artwork from public properties in Lynchburg. Other examples of increased media exposure include local television news coverage of a Labor Day rally in support of living wage campaigns, radio coverage of living wage and restoration of voting rights campaigns, newspaper articles highlighting the VOP internship program and the used computer project, and key op-eds on tax reform and restoration of voting rights.

Four issues of *virginia.organizing*, VOP's news magazine with a circulation of more than 7,000, were published. This publication provides news about VOP, its chapters, affiliates, and other groups in the state. Leadership profiles are included, along with regular columns on organizing skills (in English and Spanish) and understanding the economy. The VOP web site, <http://www.virginia-organizing.org>, includes an action alert system and links to other organizations and information resources.

Internship Program

VOP is currently working with 10 high school and college student interns. In 2002, activities in the internship program included:

- participation in living wage campaigns;
- attendance by LaToya Brackett and VOP's office manager Laura Ramirez at an international youth conference in Belize sponsored by Agricultural Missions;
- completion of summer internships by three college students who worked on living wage issues;
- coordination of an Agrarian Reform Panel, by VOP Intern Adam Turner and Agricultural Missions, as part of the Rural

Justice Tour 2002, involving representatives of the Landless Farmers Movement of Brazil, the Network of Amazonian Cooperation in Venezuela, and the National Indigenous Congress in Mexico; and,

- attendance by VOP interns at the World Economic Conference in New York City.



Leadership Training Events

VOP exceeded the goal of holding at least 65 days of trainings each year. Trainings included:

- numerous one-day and three-day *Dismantling Racism* workshops;
- a workshop on how *Dismantling Racism* workshops assist in building a strong citizens' organization for a conference of the National Coalition of Education Activists, *Reclaiming Our Children's Future: Uniting Families, Schools and Communities*;
- a training of trainers for the tax reform workshop which will give a real boost to citizens developing a broader understanding of these issues;
- a VOP *Leadership School* that included training on media, and on how to get people active in a campaign;

- a *Principles of Community Organizing* class at the University of Virginia (fall semester) in conjunction with the Carter Woodson Institute for African and African-American Studies;
- a training event on computer-based strategic research for VOP staff and labor union organizers from Virginia led by Will Collette of the AFL-CIO Research Department;
- participation on a panel discussion, *Organizing and Computer Aided Mapping*, at the Progressive Technology Project Convening in San Diego, CA; and,
- an organizing training workshop for staff of the member groups of the Western Organization of Resource Councils.

Organizational Capacity



In the past year, VOP . . .

- adopted a comprehensive staff growth plan to be implemented gradually through the year 2010;
- added the capacity to do GIS mapping;
- contracted with an experienced organizer to cultivate relationships for VOP and to get more people in northern Virginia active on statewide campaigns;
- hired a communications coordinator;
- upgraded all technological systems — fax, e-mail, regular mail, database — to quickly send out press releases, letters to the editor and op-eds to media sources across the state;

- upgraded and expanded the website □ <http://www.virginia-organizing.org>;
- updated the database with new legislative districting information;
- expanded grassroots fundraising through increased donations from individuals and faith-based communities;
- increased overall staff and volunteer participation in grassroots fundraising;
- participated in the Combined Virginia Campaign, the workplace giving program for state employees;
- facilitated four grassroots fundraising trainings;
- continued to develop a planned giving program;
- formalized the endowment;
- customized the database to track grassroots fundraising, to make reports easier to produce, and to expand the information kept for each entry;
- hired a foundation grants coordinator to assist with grant writing, reporting, research and administration of foundation and religious institution development; and,
- increased grant awards, receiving 18 grants from a portfolio of private foundations and national religious sources.

Building Relationships with Other Organizations

During 2002, VOP staff and key leaders have assisted other organizations by:

- providing consultations, campaign support and other assistance to seven VOP affiliates and at least 60 other organizations working on environmental, education, LGBT, economic security, anti-racism and other issues;
- providing an attorney to give legal advice to other social justice organizations;
- continuing to build and strengthen relationships with other organizations that could work on mutual interests; and,
- distributing used computers, printers, fax machines, copiers, scanners and a lot of office furniture and supplies to other non-profit organizations.



VOP Affiliates

The Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee/
Comité de Apoyo de Inquilinos y Trabajadores

Equality Virginia

Appalachian Peace Education Center

Public Housing Association of Residents (Charlottesville)

Virginia Forest Watch

Virginia Health and Environment Project

Richmond Peace Education Center