



*. . . real people, dealing with real problems,
working for real solutions*



2009 Annual Report

Virginia Organizing Project 2009 Annual Report

The Virginia Organizing Project expanded in 2009, with more grassroots leaders who learned new skills, more direct actions and forums, more staff, and more constituent meetings with legislators. In addition, we increased our media exposure, worked with more Joint Plan of Work groups, added new technology and raised more funds than in the previous year.

This annual report highlights our accomplishments in the following areas:

- Building strategic capacity
- Issue campaign highlights
- Involving people in the organizing who are directly affected by the issues
- Leadership development
- Awards
- VOP by the numbers



Of course, all of these elements are interwoven: increased capacity leads to getting more people active, and leadership training results in more campaign successes. While key metrics are listed at the end of the report, the changes people experience while coming together with others to improve life in their communities is immeasurable.

BUILDING STRATEGIC CAPACITY

The Virginia Organizing Project greatly increased our media presence, thanks in large part to our new Communications Director, Julie Blust, with interns and grassroots leaders writing opinion pieces, leading press conferences, and participating in radio and television interviews. VOP appeared in local, state and national media outlets including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, National Public Radio, CNN, MSNBC, *Huffington Post*, *Talking Points Memo*, and globally with the *Financial Times*, BBC and German and Japanese television.

Through our statewide letter-to-the editor distribution system, VOP helped dozens of people submit letters on financial reform, health care reform, racial profiling, civic participation, restoration of voting rights and more. Letters from VOP members graced the pages of almost every paper in the state.

VOP also developed a blog for the Civic Engagement Project summer canvassers to post their Front Porch Diaries, added Facebook and Twitter and hired a designer to upgrade the website.

To increase our capacity to work with citizens across the Commonwealth, VOP hosted a Power Analysis meeting on April 25 with grassroots leaders, board, staff and members of other grassroots groups in Virginia. VOP volunteers and interns made more than 47,000 phone calls through a virtual phone bank system that allows us to call into any area of the state and identify people who are interested in a particular issue, and ask them to take action, such as calling their Member of Congress. These contacts are documented and shared with other grassroots groups, and help identify people who are willing to take action in communities where most groups do not have good contacts.

We upgraded our online donation system and received four times as many online donations as in 2008. We broadened the base of people in the organization who actively fundraise for VOP. Leaders, board members and staff made almost 5,000 calls during our Fall Fundraising Campaign. Five supporters, including author Barbara Ehrenreich, wrote letters to friends and colleagues requesting donations for VOP. VOP held its sixth and most successful Social Justice Bowl, a community-building fundraiser where local residents come for a soup and bread supper and take home handcrafted soup bowls donated by local potters. Local community activists are honored at the event.

In 2009 VOP had Joint Plans of Work — a formal working relationship — with 48 social justice and environmental groups in Virginia. VOP provided administrative support to these groups so they could focus their time and resources on their missions, and facilitated the idea of borrowing and sharing power so we all can be more effective.

To help with all our efforts, in addition to the new Communications Director, VOP hired a Major Gifts Coordinator, an Organizer in Southern Virginia and an Organizer in Virginia Beach. We also worked to establish new campus chapters across the state.

ISSUE CAMPAIGN HIGHLIGHTS

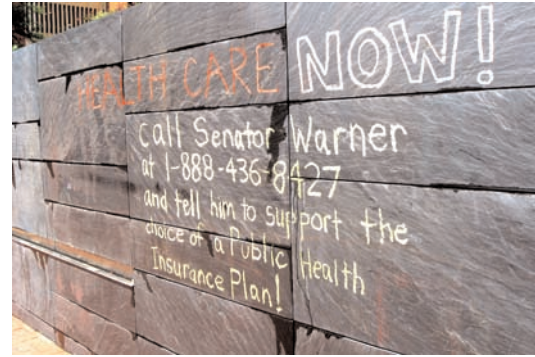
Civic Engagement Project

The 2009 Civic Engagement Project's 40 paid interns canvassed 142,679 doors across the state, talking with residents about priority issues and health care reform. The interns also collected 1,183 used cell phones and printer cartridges for recycling and registered 360 people



to vote. VOP also published and distributed 275,000 copies of *Virginia Votes 2009: Your Guide to the Virginia Elections*, a 32-page non-partisan voter guide.

Health care reform



VOP was Health Care for America Now campaign's lead organization in Virginia, and coordinated with partner groups that included the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, Tenants and Workers United, Service Employees International Union, Change that Works, AFL-CIO, AFSCME, Organizing for

America, Move On, Democracy for America, Main Street Alliance and others. VOP organized health care forums, rallies and press conferences with a wide range of groups across the state in which people told their health care stories to legislators and demanded quality, accessible health care for everyone. VOP interns took the lead on many health care campaign tactics, including making videos of health care reform supporters, developing skits, generating phone calls and going door-to-door.

Restoration of voting rights for former felons in Virginia

VOP held forums and other events on restoration of voting rights in at least 10 communities throughout the state, often with local community groups. VOP worked with other groups to push Governor Tim Kaine to sign an Executive Order to grant restoration of rights for 300,000 disenfranchised former felons in Virginia. VOP led the way on grassroots action, holding events and generating thousands of calls and letters asking Governor Kaine to sign an Executive Order. Unfortunately, he took no action before leaving office in January.

Getting out the vote for the November statewide election

The Virginia Organizing Project had a wide range of non-partisan activities to get out the vote for the November statewide elections. In Virginia Beach, Williamsburg, Fredericksburg, Roanoke, Charlottesville, Martinsville and Southwest Virginia, canvassers distributed thousands of door hangers and non-partisan voter guides, and volunteers called thousands of voters from phone banks in Charlottesville, Fredericksburg, Richmond and Washington County.

Students at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg tabled outside the dining hall, passing out about 200 non-partisan voter guides and flyers to contact members of Congress about health care reform, while the VOP William and Mary Campus Chapter and Youth NAACP canvassed door-to-door in the Williamsburg area. VOP's vice-chairperson recruited the Petersburg chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Alumnae sorority's social action committee members to make 1,100 phone calls in the Richmond area.

Finally, VOP sent an action e-mail to more than 8,000 people with a toll-free number to help with voter problems and distributed 3,000 pamphlets that the ACLU and NAACP produced about voter rights and responsibilities.

Tax reform

The Virginia Organizing Project pushed tax reform and financial reform at the federal level by joining a national campaign to extend the estate tax, putting together an information sheet on the federal estate tax, including background material, talking points and action steps, to educate VOP members on the issue. Groups of VOP members visited the staffs of Senators Mark Warner and Jim Webb and Congressman Tom Perriello to talk about the importance of raising revenue from the estate tax to help cover the budget deficit and fund other priorities. We worked with the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy to release a report showing how low- and middle-income families in Virginia pay a far higher share of their income in state and local taxes than do the richest families in Virginia.

VOP also worked towards sensible national financial reform that includes the creation of a Consumer Financial Protection Agency, generating 6,178 calls asking people to contact their member of Congress and more than a dozen letters to the editor. At the state level, VOP's Tax Reform Committee used Black Friday, the country's busiest shopping day, to call for reducing or eliminating the regressive state sales tax. VOP's Tax Reform Committee crafted a progressive tax reform proposal that addresses the state's budget crisis, providing for new revenue while keeping vital services from being cut. VOP's proposal was scheduled to be released the first week of January in time for the General Assembly session.

Predatory lending

Legislators became incensed that payday lenders were trying to avoid





having to comply with the new payday lending requirements — that VOP and other groups pushed for in 2008 — by offering a new loan product. Consequently, legislation passed that would prevent a payday lender from

also offering an open-end loan, other than one that was secured by a car, unless the payday lender gave up its license to offer payday loans. If the lender gave up its license, it would be prevented from offering payday loans for 10 years.

The legislature agreed to set up a study committee between General Assembly sessions to research car title lending and to make recommendations to the legislators before the 2010 session.

Economic security

Employers are now required to post notices provided by the Virginia Department of Social Services to inform employees of their potential eligibility for the earned income tax credit.

New legislation revises the limitation on receipt of one-time diversionary cash assistance from local departments of social services from one payment per 60-month period to one payment per 12-month period.

Verified voting

A resolution passed in the General Assembly calling for the establishment of a joint subcommittee to study postelection audits of voting equipment.

Local issue campaigns

The Virginia Organizing Project Chapters had lots of local activities:

- VOP Chapter members successfully pressed the Washington County Board of Supervisors to reinstate a public comment period at their meetings.
- The VOP Lee County Chapter worked to establish a drug court in southwest Virginia.

- VOP sponsored a forum on Housing in the Northern Shenandoah Valley, attended by more than 80 people, that resulted in commitments to improve housing in the area in the coming year.
- VOP Williamsburg Chapter members attended a meeting of the James City County Comprehensive Plan Steering Team, which almost entirely incorporated VOP's suggestions regarding mixed cost, inclusionary housing developments for the local workforce.
- VOP participated in the revitalization of the Winchester NAACP Branch, after almost a decade of inactivity.
- VOP began working with the Danville Regional Foundation to learn more about obesity in the city of Danville.
- The Washington County VOP Chapter and other groups won a local campaign to keep a proposed truck stop from being built at a local exit.

INVOLVING THOSE WHO ARE DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY THE ISSUES

There are numerous examples of how people who are directly affected by the issues VOP tackles worked to solve the problems they face. Here are some examples:

- VOP volunteers held a series of rush-hour events at their local Falls Church Metro stops to encourage commuters to call Congressman Gerry Connolly and Senator Mark Warner, asking them to support the public health insurance option. Event organizers had a life-sized cardboard cutout of Congressman Connolly “to make sure that at least the two dimensional version of him is listening to the concerns of his constituents and not of the insurance industry lobby.”
- VOP organized a delegation of rural Virginians from all over the state who traveled to Washington for a “Rural Issues in Health Care Reform” congressional briefing.
- Twelve VOP leaders attended the Rural America Listening Tour, which included presentations by members of President Barack Obama’s Cabinet.
- VOP interns and grassroots leaders had multiple meetings with their Congressional representatives in Washington and in their local offices to discuss health care reform.
- A VOP delegation attended the lobby day for the Employee Free Choice Act in Washington.

- VOP attended an informational meeting with local citizen members of the General Assembly Subcommittee on Massive Resistance.
- Tidewater VOP members told their representatives in Congress it is “time to deliver” on health care reform with a series of events that included a canvass day, prayer services focusing on health care reform, a health care reform lobby walk visiting local Congressional district offices, and a Day of the Dead (Dia de Los Muertos) tribute to the 122 people who lose their lives daily due to lack of health insurance.
- VOP joined with the Main Street Alliance for a week of action bringing small businesses together nationwide to advocate for real reform. In Richmond, local small business owners rallied together on Main Street, calling attention to the impact skyrocketing premiums have on their businesses and asking Congress to offer relief.
- Fredericksburg VOP volunteers donning Santa hats gathered outside the Fredericksburg library and asked local residents to sign a “Snowflake Petition” by writing their health care stories and concerns on ornamental snowflakes later delivered to Senators Mark Warner and Jim Webb.
- VOP members who are unemployed joined groups from across the country at the National Day of Action on Jobs during President Barack Obama’s Jobs Summit. The groups asked the President and Congress to create a community jobs program that would put 2.5 million people to work in jobs with living wages, working to improve their communities.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Leadership development is a key component of all VOP activities. Some examples of how leadership development fit into our work in 2009 include: two workshops in Hopewell to help participants understand the basics of setting up a community organizing program; a “Know Your Rights” training in northern Virginia; a lobbying workshop with nearly 50 attendees



co-sponsored by the VOP Lynchburg Chapter, Operation Turnaround and the

Lynchburg League of Women Voters; a class on community organizing at the University of Mary Washington; a presentation on racial profiling at the Winchester NAACP “Law and You” event to about 50 people, including young people and law enforcement officials; a meeting in Norton to talk about next steps after a local Dismantling Racism workshop; and a lobbying training in Fredericksburg.

One of VOP’s interns worked with students in a Social Justice Seminar class at Christopher Newport University. Each of four groups worked on one of VOP’s issue campaigns and developed direct actions around their issue, such as virtual phone banking, setting up a table on campus, creating a Facebook group, meeting with the campus police chief, and talking with Hampton City Council members. Four VOP members, an intern and an organizer served on a panel at the Social Work Celebration of 80 social work students at James Madison University, sharing information on law enforcement training activity and voting rights restoration. The keynote speaker was also a VOP member.

VOP staff and leaders made presentations at national meetings as well, including the Council of Foundations, the Funders Committee for Civic Participation, the Civic Engagement Network, State Voices and the Western States Center’s CSTI training (“Building Statewide Power” and “Applied Analysis: Power Mapping”).

AWARDS!

- VOP received the 2009 Community Change Champion Award from the Center for Community Change for making a deep and meaningful commitment to low-income communities and disenfranchised constituencies. The award was presented by Congressman Tom Perriello.



- The 2009 Mitch Van Yahres Family-Friendly Employer Award from Children, Youth & Family Services in Charlottesville went to VOP for providing employees full family health care coverage with no out-of-pocket expenses, as well as a long list of other family-friendly benefits.
- The Hampton Citizen Unity Commission gave an award to VOP for working to improve cultural diversity and race relations.

VOP BY THE NUMBERS

- One-to-one conversations with prospective new grassroots leaders: 810
- Leaders who used a new skill: 789
- Workshops held/number of participants: 59/1,492
- Forums sponsored/number of participants: 30/1,810
- Direct actions organized/number of participants: 44/1,009
- Constituent meetings with legislators/number of participants: 120/401
- VOP Civic Engagement Project interns (paid): 40
- Other VOP interns (unpaid): 38
- Phone calls (virtual phone bank): 47,000
- Doors canvassed: 155,679
- Fall Fundraising Campaign phone calls: approx. 5,000
- Letters to the Editor: 36
- Opinion editorials: 7
- Media releases: 75
- Media hits: 240
- Consultations with other groups: 229
- Number of refurbished computers given to low-income individuals and nonprofits: 73

VOP State Governing Board

*Gabby Brown • Sandra Cook, Vice-Chairperson
Jason Guard, Treasurer • Janice "Jay" Johnson, Chairperson
Ladelle McWhorter, Secretary • Jodi Mincemoyer
Denise Smith • Thomasine Wilson*





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.

Virginia Organizing Project Statement of Beliefs

- We believe 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.
- We believe that every person in the Commonwealth is entitled to a living wage and benefit package that is sufficient to provide the basic necessities of life, including adequate housing, a nutritious diet, proper child care, sound mental and physical health care, and a secure retirement.
- We believe that every person is entitled to an equal educational opportunity.
- We believe that community, economic, social and environmental policy should be developed with the greatest input from the people it is meant to serve, and that the policies should promote, celebrate and sustain the human and natural resources of Virginia.
- We believe in the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty, in a progressive tax system based on the ability to pay, and in making the nation's financial systems, including the Federal Reserve Bank, more responsive to the average citizen's needs.
- We believe that we should enhance and celebrate diversity in our community and in our state.
- We believe that those who have positions of authority in our governmental bodies, law enforcement agencies and institutions of learning should reflect the diversity of our communities.
- We believe that our public officials should be held accountable for their actions and decisions.
- We believe in the rights of workers, consumers, shareholders and taxpayers to democratic self-organization.
- We believe in the elimination of the death penalty in all cases because it is fundamentally inhumane, ineffective as a deterrent to crime, and disproportionately and unjustly applied against people of color and those who are economically or educationally disadvantaged.

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