

Virginia Organizing State Governing Board Bios and Photos

To schedule an interview with a Virginia Organizing Board member, please contact Amanda Pohl at 804-337-1912 or amanda@virginia-organizing.org.

For a downloadable high-resolution JPG photo, please click the hyperlinked name of the Board member.



[Sandra A. Cook](#)

Chairperson

Raised in Hopewell, Sandra is a retired social worker living in Petersburg. As a social worker, Sandra supervised the Independent Living Center, helping people with disabilities advocate for their rights. Sandra was an early member of the Virginia Organizing Petersburg chapter. Sandra's first local issue reorganized community members to put a fair housing officer into a longstanding vacancy. Since 2002, Sandra continues to work to increase the minimum wage, address issues of racial profiling, reform the health care system and restore voting rights for former felons. In addition to her work with Virginia Organizing, Sandra serves on the State Rehab Council and Disability Commission, positions appointed by former Governor Tim Kaine. "The real reason I continue to work with Virginia Organizing is because when we say we're going to do something we actually do it," said Cook.



[D. Ladelle McWhorter](#)

Vice-Chairperson

Del lived in Alabama, Missouri and Tennessee prior to moving to Virginia in 1992, to teach philosophy at the University of Richmond. An advocate for social justice, Del got involved with the Virginia Organizing through Virginians for Justice meetings and other social justice work. Her first Virginia Organizing campaign worked to establish Workman's Compensation for injured furniture factory workers in southern Virginia. Del believes a tax reform package and anti-employment discrimination based on sexual orientation are some of the most important issues facing Virginians in the coming years. An educator by profession, Del looks forward to further educational opportunities such as Dismantling Racism and Anti-discrimination workshops.



[Janice "Jay" Johnson](#)

Treasurer

Jay served as Chairperson of Virginia Organizing for five years until taking on the role of Treasurer. She feels a great sense of pride in the growth of Virginia Organizing during these years. She is proud of Virginia Organizing's work on health care, restoration of voting rights for former non-violent felons, and election protection. Jay committed to Virginia Organizing after attending a board meeting where she was impressed by the passion and seriousness

with which members went about their work. During Governor Mark Warner's term, Jay devoted much time to reforming Virginia's tax system. Similarly, she and many others statewide pushed successfully for policy change in housing and redevelopment. In subsequent years, she worked with Virginia Organizing's strategic assessment and organization by state legislative districts.

Jay was born in Hampton, Virginia, but has lived in Newport News for the past 13 years. After receiving an undergraduate degree from Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, she returned to Hampton Institute for a Master's Degree in guidance counseling. Tirelessly, Jay pursued careers in Professional Girl Scouting, social work, entrepreneurship, and finally spent 15 years with the City of Hampton's youth department. When Jay is not organizing, she enjoys involvement in a book group and is an avid traveler. Mostly, Jay loves to be surrounded by friends.



Thomasine Wilson

Secretary

Thomasine got involved with Virginia Organizing in 2006 during an organizing campaign on the issue of predatory lending. Having been caught in a car title loan cycle herself, Thomasine got involved. Thomasine ended up testifying at the General Assembly on predatory lending and sharing her story with the media. Thomasine continued to speak out on Virginia Organizing issues including predatory lending, health care and the environment. As a full-time Personal Care Assistant and a member of the Virginia Organizing Health Care Reform Committee, Thomasine has been particularly passionate about health care reform. She has headed lobby meetings with members of Congress in Washington, has spoken in front of huge crowds and has performed hours phone-banking.

Thomasine reflects on her three years of work with Virginia Organizing, "I like working with Virginia Organizing because it is hands-on and face-to-face. We work on the issues that matter at the moment, when people are hurting. When people want to be heard we give them a voice."



Gabrielle (Gabby) Brown

Originally from Prince George, Virginia, Gabby Brown got involved with Virginia Organizing by knocking on doors for eight hours each day through the Summer Civic Engagement program. Gabby saw first-hand social disparities facing community members in the Richmond and Tri-City area. She was taken aback by the number of people who had no access to health care and how many formerly incarcerated citizens are left out of the political process. She recently graduated with a degree in

Political Science from Virginia Tech and is now pursuing a Master's Degree of Health Care Administration. In addition to her work with Virginia Organizing, Gabby has been part of many justice-seeking organizations on and off campus, including Big Brothers Big Sisters. She commends Virginia Organizing's ability to stay on the forefront of multiple social justice issues, encouraging all constituents to be actively involved in the legislative process.



Debra Grant

Debra Grant is a retired mother and grandmother and considers herself a “professional volunteer” in the South Hampton Roads area. She has been active with Virginia Organizing since 1999. Debra’s interest in social justice began at a very young age when she helped her grandparents and uncle work the polls on Election Day and provided food and clothing to working people. Debra is primarily interested in the Affordable Care Act, homelessness, education, and protecting voting rights for all people. Debra works with Virginia Organizing to educate our politicians and the community on the issues Virginians face, train young people to become activists in their community, and increase the number of grassroots leaders and actions.



Johnny Mayo

Johnny is a member of the Danville Chapter of Virginia Organizing and comes to the State Governing Board with experience as a Chapter leader and working with young people. He has participated in a wide range of activities with Virginia Organizing, including meeting with his Virginia Delegate and U.S. Representative, participating in direct actions, and meeting with local officials to discuss solutions to problems in the community. He is devoted to his family and has been married for 25 years and has four children. Johnny is passionate about working with local Virginia Organizing Chapters and brings that passion to the Board.



Ray Scher

Ray graduated from Siena College in 1970 with a Bachelor's degree in history, and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He served in the Army Reserves from 1970-1976. During that time he also worked as a dishwasher, busboy, construction laborer and bartender in Ocean City, Maryland. In 1977-1979, he worked as a houseparent/childcare worker at the McQuade Foundation in New Windsor, New York.

Ray graduated with an associate degree in nursing in 1982 and was licensed as a registered nurse. He moved to Virginia in 1983 to pursue a career in nursing. He has worked as a psychiatric nurse at the University of Virginia and at the Veterans Administration, as a state nursing home inspector in Kansas, and as a managed care nurse at a large Virginia-based insurance company. He retired in 2009 and became a volunteer with Virginia Organizing, working primarily with the Healthcare Committee on the Affordable Care Act.



Denise Smith

At-Large Executive Committee member

Denise Smith has been with organization from the start. When she is not at her day job as co-program director of Wolf Creek Indian Village and Museum, she is spending time with her grandchildren and serving on Virginia Organizing's State Governing Board and Virginia Organizing's Tax Reform Committee. Denise was involved with some of the first VOP campaigns including community effort in Lee County to change the way juries are chosen. In 1996, an African-American man was going to be tried with an all-white jury when community members, along with allies from across the region, descended on the courthouse and eventually were influential in changing the way that juries are chosen there.

Denise is particularly proud of a Virginia Organizing campaign in 2003 where many groups challenged a state policy stipulating that unmarried people could not purchase a home together through a state loan program. The policy was designed to discriminate against homosexuals; however, Virginia Organizing found that the law affected many people. Virginia Organizing found a pair of sisters who wanted to pull their resources and buy a home together, but were prohibited by the policy. The sisters became unlikely, but effective, spokespeople. Eventually the policy was changed.

For every victory and defeat, Denise has remained active in every aspect of Virginia Organizing. She attends lobby days, writes letters to the editor, and helps write tax reform policy and even stands outside of the Today Show to defend community organizers. "Following Sarah Palin's comment about community organizers, we were in New York City for a workshop when someone got the bright idea that we should go to the Today Show and let them know what community organizing is really about. We held up our signs and gave interviews to let everyone know that organizing is something we are incredibly proud of," recalls Smith.



Janie Williams

Originally from Weems, Virginia, Janie Williams is a graduate of the University of Virginia and currently resides in Charlottesville. With a degree in History, Janie is interested in the ways in which the past affects the present and has a deep commitment to social justice and public service. During her college career, Janie became impatient with the direct service model, working in homeless shelters and tutoring refugee students, until she discovered Virginia Organizing's style of grassroots community organizing through her coursework on rural poverty.

As a result, Janie became involved with the Virginia Organizing chapter at the University of Virginia from its outset, and co-led the group for two years. She was responsible for recruiting membership, moving members to action, and casting a vision for the future of the chapter. Janie also interned with Virginia Organizing during the summer of 2009, whereby she was part of a team that knocked on more than 15,000 doors in the Northern Virginia area in support of health care reform. Janie has a great mind for the progressive policies that Virginia Organizing believes in hard-hitting field campaigns to make those policies a reality.