



VIRGINIA ORGANIZING PROJECT 2004 ANNUAL REPORT

DECEMBER 2004

VOP EXPANDS ITS BASE

In the spring of 2004, the VOP State Governing Board discussed a goal for expanding the organization into more areas of Virginia and decided to launch an organizing drive over the summer and fall. Objectives were set to establish new chapters in 20 of Virginia's state legislative districts. This expansion will create new opportunities for low- and moderate-income Virginians to gain experience in talking directly to elected officials about policy issues of concern to them and to develop skills that will raise participation levels both locally and statewide. VOP exceeded its goal. By the end of the year, we have 21 developing chapters. Added to existing chapters, VOP now has working local units that cover 32 state legislative districts.

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Initial meetings in these newly developing chapters focused on a general overview of VOP and current state policy campaigns on racial profiling and tax reform. Some groups are considering issues of concern in their local communities as well. Chapter participants have met with their state delegates; many participants had never before spoken to their

delegate. Reports from some of the new District Chapters were included in the winter issue of *virginia.organizing*, VOP's news magazine.

Local Chapter Developments

- On March 16, 30 residents of the Greater Williamsburg area attended a meeting to petition the VOP State Governing Board to become a VOP Chapter. During 2004, the Williamsburg VOP Chapter has identified their first local issue campaign which will focus on low-income and affordable housing. The home of the College of William and Mary and Colonial Williamsburg, many workers at area hotels and restaurants are not able to afford housing in Williamsburg. Although the chapter is starting with housing issues, they also have recommended a wage increase at the College of William and Mary. In addition, the Williamsburg VOP Chapter is providing leadership for the developing District Chapters in Virginia House Districts 64, 93 and 96.
- During 2004, the Petersburg VOP Chapter succeeded in their campaign to get the city to fund a fair housing officer/housing ombudsman position. At the same time, the city also lowered their property tax which brought about budget cuts. The Petersburg VOP Chapter succeeded in maintaining the new fair housing position in the city budget despite the cuts.
- The Amherst County VOP Chapter has joined with new members of the developing House District 24 VOP Chapter. As a result, this District Chapter identified key community leaders who support the statewide racial profiling campaign. In another development, a chapter member wrote an informative article on the chapter's activities which was published in the *Piedmont Area Journal*.
- During 2004, the Amherst County VOP Chapter also succeeded in their work to have a new

bridge over the James River named in recognition of the Monacan Nation, the indigenous people of central and western Virginia.

STATEWIDE ISSUE CAMPAIGNS

Tax Reform

VOP's statewide tax reform campaign achieved success on many levels in 2004. As a result of 41 *Who Pays and Who Benefits?* workshops, VOP's media campaign, organizing chapter visits with legislators and participation in public meetings, the statewide tax reform campaign allowed VOP to experience a new level of organizational capacity. VOP . . .

- added information that can be used in evaluating our work to deepen and broaden a grassroots base in Virginia
- increased our visibility, the number of persons participating and the geographic areas of influence for VOP
- expanded the number of relationships we have with other groups working for change
- increased the level of understanding on issues of tax policy and its impact on local communities and the working poor
- increased the number of legislative contacts and deepened relationships with state legislators interested in change
- increased our understanding of the General Assembly's workings that can improve effectiveness in future campaigns

The changes in tax policy achieved in Virginia during 2004 include:

- ✓ a raise in the filing threshold from \$5,000 to \$7,000 for individuals and from \$8,000 to \$14,000 for married couples, which exempts 141,000 low-income Virginians from paying state income taxes
- ✓ the creation of a new low-income tax credit for the working poor
- ✓ an increase in the personal exemption from \$800 to \$900
- ✓ elimination of the "marriage penalty"
- ✓ a schedule of reductions in sales tax on food, working toward the total elimination of this tax

- ✓ elimination of two common loopholes used by many major corporations and businesses to legally avoid paying state income taxes
- ✓ a tax increase on cigarettes
- ✓ a means test of the deduction formerly based solely on age

In terms of budget changes, there was:

- ✓ an increase of revenue totaling \$1.5 billion in new state support to public education, reducing the pressure on local real estate taxes
- ✓ an increase in \$32 million to assist persons with mental disabilities
- ✓ the largest infusion of funds for natural resource programs in Virginia history — \$15 million each year to the Water Quality Improvement Fund and \$2.5 million per year to the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation

Racial Profiling

In 2004, VOP worked to build leadership and grassroots support for a bill sponsored by one of Virginia's African-American state senators, Sen. Henry Marsh, which calls for the collection of data giving the racial identity of people stopped on routine police traffic stops. In a session with a primary focus on budget and tax issues, we were able to show enough support to have this bill acted on, even though it was carried over to the 2005 legislative session. Since that time, our campaign strategy team has been building a campaign to heighten the activity around this issue. Del. Jeion Ward has agreed to introduce the bill in the House in 2005.

Early in the year, the *Lynchburg News & Advance* interviewed Mary Randolph-Preston, Vice-Chair of the VOP Statewide Governing Board and law enforcement officer from Lynchburg, regarding the goals of the racial profiling campaign. In addition to meeting with the State Sheriff's Association and the State Association of Chiefs of Police to gain support on the issue, the VOP Racial Profiling Committee also met with the Chief Deputy Attorney General and Lieutenant Governor and his staff to build support for documentation of traffic stops in the Attorney General's recommendations to the General Assembly in 2005.

VOP chapters have been actively involved in generating support to address the negative effects of racial profiling. Developing VOP chapters are being introduced to the goals of this campaign and are making progress on this issue across the state.

A well-organized group of African-American college students, supported by members of the VOP Petersburg chapter, conducted their first press conference in November. The press conference focused on the students' experiences of repeated stops by local law enforcement. Through this experience, the students learned how to contact press personnel, issue press releases and secure an appropriate location (a local church) for the event.

In 2004, VOP's success in related Criminal Justice Reform work, where we were able to get changes to the restoration of rights process for former felons, continued to build capacity in our organizing efforts. We facilitate the restoration process for former felons where we find an opportunity. We include information on these changes in our publications used in voter registration and mobilization work. As a result of the changes accomplished in this campaign, a record number of former felons were able to register and vote in the last election. Coverage of this accomplishment in local newspapers, including the *Roanoke Times* and the *Lynchburg News & Advance*, continued to give VOP recognition for our work in this area.

Other Campaign Work

In Virginia, where the "Dillon Rule" is repeatedly used to limit progress in localities rather than check regressive policies, VOP continues to watch for attempts to undo previous changes. We successfully stopped an attempt to prohibit living wage ordinances from being established by local governments. In a similar effort, we assisted Equality Virginia in blocking a move by the Attorney General to limit local governments from adding sexual orientation to non-discrimination policies. We also assisted in stopping an effort to re-establish the "family rule" as a policy of the Virginia Housing Development Authority (an attempt to discriminate against gays and lesbians).

VOP continues to use our media connections to confront and dismantle the "isms" that keep people from working together. For example, we supported Equality Virginia by forwarding an action alert on Virginia's health insurance policies, and we assisted the Help Winneba Read project with consultations and a radio interview that highlighted the project as well as the work of VOP.

LIVING WAGE CAMPAIGNS

In 2004, VOP joined the Virginia Alliance for Worker Justice, a new partnership of religious, community and worker organizations, brought together to promote an increase in the Virginia minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$6.50 an hour. In this campaign, VOP works with the Virginia Council of Churches, the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, the Virginia Muslim Coalition and the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, and other groups. VOP issued a media advisory statewide and organized a media conference to support this effort.

Charlottesville City Council passed a budget resolution linking living wages to the cost of living index, assuring a continual rise in wages at the lowest tier. In our work with students at the University of Virginia, a contracted service provider for the University, Aramark, increased wages for its dining hall workers.

Earlier in the year, VOP coordinated a living wage workshop for students from nine Virginia college campuses. Guest speakers included: Ben McKean, from United Students Against Sweatshops; and Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By In America*.

VOP interns continued to work on living wage campaigns. Two interns, Alex Davis and Erin Tapscott, along with Brenda Lambert, a retiree and volunteer at VOP, testified before the Charlottesville City Council on living wages. It was the very first public speaking experience for Erin. They did an excellent job.

VOP has provided assistance to other living wage campaigns in Richmond, Lynchburg, Blacksburg/Montgomery County, the Wythe County School Board and Emory & Henry College. In 2004, a group of students at Emory & Henry College produced a newsletter, gathered research, and obtained signatures and endorsements. The Student Senate passed a resolution supporting the work, vision and principles of the campaign.

In another development, the University of Mary Washington added a 1.5 percent in-band increase to the three percent increase in wages appropriated by the Virginia General Assembly as a result of the successful tax reform campaign. This has resulted in

a 4.5 percent increase for classified and wage employees.

VOTER REGISTRATION & MOBILIZATION

During the 2004 election year, VOP's work included voter registration and mobilization activities around the state. In January, VOP brought together a group of low-income public housing residents and students to attend the Center for Community Change's *Presidential Dialogue with America's Families* event in Columbia, South Carolina.

During the spring, VOP published a voter's guide for the Charlottesville City Council races. The 16-page guide included information about the general election for City Council, how to register to vote, where to vote, and how to vote by absentee ballot. The main part of the guide consisted of answers to 11 questions posed to all six candidates. The local registrar attributed the higher voter turnout to the "high caliber" and distribution of the voter guide. VOP also worked with a local coalition on registration and co-sponsored a candidates' forum in the Charlottesville City Council elections.

As a recipient of a Center for Community Change grant, VOP worked to increase civic participation during the national electoral process. VOP published *No Vote, No Voice*, a non-partisan voter registration and education guide and distributed 90,000 copies statewide through 118 organizations and adult literacy programs. We produced and distributed four public service announcements to 276 radio stations statewide. Former Ambassador Julian Bond recorded the announcements focused on voter registration and the process for former felons to seek restoration of their voting rights.

VOP issued an action alert encouraging Virginians to verify that their voter registration was current and accurate and to inform others of the need to do so. The action alert included other information and links that provided additional information on voter registration.

Our chapters included Get-Out-The-Vote activities in their organizing work. They distributed voter guides and provided information on voter accessibility for those with special circumstances. Chapters provided information on the new guidelines for restoration of voting rights to former non-violent felons. VOP also worked with college students on

Get-Out-The-Vote activities at Virginia State University, the College of William and Mary, and the University of Virginia. The *Principles of Community Organizing* class at the University of Virginia (a class co-taught by one of our staff) distributed *No Vote, No Voice* guides, held a registration drive and registered 35 new voters.

As part of civic participation, VOP strongly encouraged people to vote and to serve on boards and commissions. Buckey Boone ran for office and is now a school board member in Washington County; David Rubinstein, VOP's attorney, accepted an appointment to the Virginia Fair Housing Board; and, Joe Szakos was appointed to the Charlottesville City Schools' Special Education Advisory Committee where he is working with the Independence Resource Center to coordinate a tour of each school to assess its handicap-accessibility.

THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

In June, Octavia Ware completed her full-time organizer apprenticeship. Octavia's apprenticeship was part of VOP's Women's Leadership Project that was highlighted in the winter issue of *virginia.organizing*, VOP's news magazine. VOP is happy that Octavia has agreed to continue working as a full-time organizer at VOP.

VOP has been active on Virginia's college campuses in several ways during 2004. In addition to the Living Wage Conference and voter registration activities, VOP held a leadership workshop in October for 37 students from Hampton University, an historically African-American institution, and Virginia Wesleyan College. Bettye Simmons, Leadership Institute Director at Hampton University, which hosted the event, commented that the workshop "started a dialogue between two universities that will grow into an educational partnership."

In the fall, we assisted with the teaching of a *Principles of Community Organizing* class and arranged internships and field experiences for 12 students at the University of Virginia.

VOP's high school and summer interns worked on an accessibility project, studying public facilities in their community to determine what the needs are for wheelchair accessibility. Through this project, VOP has built stronger ties with the disability

community and involved young people in a project that gave them a hands-on opportunity to develop basic skills used in community organizing.

WORKSHOPS

In 2004, VOP held a total of 46 workshops involving 862 people. Some highlights include:

- adapting our *Dismantling Racism Workshops* to use with youth;
- extending our anti-racism work to a second level of training by holding our first *Dismantling Racism II* workshop;
- holding a roundtable discussion with journalist Bill Greider;
- leading a workshop on *Engaging New Constituencies and New Voices* at the National River Rally in Wintergreen, Virginia, sponsored by the River Network; and,
- leading a workshop on *Organizing for the Long Haul* at the Institute of Management and Community Development in Montreal, Quebec.

To date, VOP has involved over 8,700 participants in workshops on community organizing, leadership skills and dismantling racism.

In other training events, VOP staff held 33 consultations with other groups interested in grassroots organizing, strategic planning for diversity and social change work, and other organizational and capacity building issues. These consultation requests indicate that VOP makes an impact in Virginia, not only through our issue campaigns but also through our ability to help other groups work more efficiently for change.

ORGANIZATIONAL ENHANCEMENTS

Communications

In 2004, VOP:

- issued 24 op-eds and letters-to-the-editor statewide
- held ten interviews for radio or television stations, including two radio interviews with attendees of *Dialogue with America's Families*
- held a rally in Manassas to counter an anti-tax protest which was picked up by Associated Press
- had at least 16 publications of op-eds and letters-to-the-editor
- issued three statewide press releases

- held two media conferences
- issued 21 action alerts
- submitted comments regarding proposed Federal Election Commission regulations that include a definition of "political committee" which would dramatically limit VOP's civic participation efforts

Technology and Database Management

VOP has 3,500 on the e-mail action alert list and over 7,000 on the database. VOP's Used Computer Project was completed in 2004. Our final count of redistributions was: 1,286 computers, 277 printers, 43 fax machines, 22 copiers, 14 typewriters and 16 scanners.

Co-Sponsored Events

In 2004, VOP co-sponsored:

- SALT (Social Action Linking Together, a program of the Arlington Roman Catholic Diocese) legislative wrap-up where VOP was recognized for our leadership in the tax reform debate. Forty-five persons were in attendance.
- a "Make Love Legal" event with Richmond Lesbian Feminists (RLF), Equality Virginia, Safe Zone, University of Richmond Diversity Thrift, MCC Richmond, PFLAG and New Directions. At least 306 persons attended.
- the Second Annual Public Officials' Reception with Equality Virginia.

Staff Development Opportunities

- Laura Ramirez and Ben Thacker-Gwaltney attended a three-part training with Progressive Technology Project in Bardstown, Kentucky, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Oakland, California;
- Cathy Woodson attended an advanced anti-racist training in New Orleans;
- Brian Johns attended a three-day training in Antioch on community organizing; and,
- Larry Yates attended a gender workshop at the East Regional meeting of the National Organizers' Alliance.

Writing Projects

During 2004, VOP worked on several writing projects. In September, we concluded the VOP Anti-Racism Writing Project with the publication of *Tools for Dismantling Racism*. This publication is available through our website and news magazine.

The Community Organizing Writing Project is finalizing a book of profiles of community organizers and has begun work on a book of essays by rural community organizers.

GRASSROOTS AND FOUNDATION GRANTS FUNDRAISING

Grassroots fundraising income increased 27 percent in 2004 over the previous year, thanks to the generous support of individual donors and faith-based communities. We also met our 2004 foundation grants goal and added two new funders.

Two fun events this year included a summer outdoor music festival in Montebello and VOP's Social Justice Bowl I, which exceeded all expectations. Virginia potters donated 140 hand-crafted bowls. A sold out crowd of VOP supporters each chose a bowl, filled it with soup and enjoyed a great evening in which we honored some of VOP's stalwart volunteers.

Other fundraising activities continued to grow:

- A statewide social services agency collected inactive cell phones. These cell phones are being added to those donated by women's shelters and individuals. The phones are recycled to keep

them out of landfills, and VOP receives a small monetary gift per phone.

- Almost 100 VOP supporters now use a gift card coded to VOP when they shop at Kroger. VOP receives a five-percent donation from these grocery expenditures, and supporters of this program incur no additional costs.

VOP continues to receive recognition for our fundraising efforts. In 2004, we answered requests from other organizations interested in building a stronger grassroots fundraising and grants program. Some organizations who received fundraising consultations included: ACORN, Appalachian Sustainable Development, Neighborhood Resource Center in Richmond, Rail Solution, Shelter for Help in Emergency, Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty and the Virginia Minority Supplier Development Council.

REPORT SUMMARY

2004 has been a very exciting and challenging year in organizing; it has been no less for the Virginia Organizing Project. We celebrated some important accomplishments and more people in Virginia understand what can happen when Virginians work together across constituency lines on a variety of issues. The work of justice goes on and VOP's matter of factness about being around for the long haul helps put things in perspective for people who care about justice, even when they feel they're walking into a strong headwind. VOP is ready to take on the challenges of the coming year with increased strength and capacity. We will continue to build a wider and deeper grassroots base in Virginia and to address important issues in effective ways.

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