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VIRGINIA ORGANIZING PROJECT 2005 ANNUAL REPORT

In the life of the Virginia Organizing Project, one year is a long time. A lot happens in one year! We hope that this annual report gives a clear sense of VOP's growth and the continued excitement that helps the organization thrive on a daily basis.

To be more effective, statewide organizations like the Virginia Organizing Project need to expand, be visible, increase leadership and make specific, tangible changes to improve the quality of people's lives.

In terms of expansion, we have a presence in more communities, as reflected in the fact that we met with 45 state legislators compared with 31 last year. These 45 VOP constituent groups met with legislators prior to the General Assembly Session to request policy changes. After the session, we will meet with specific legislators to strategize for future policy issue work. These legislative meetings are being done more strategically — building stronger relationships among various constituencies, being deliberate about leadership development opportunities, keeping better records of who participates, developing a systematic reporting mechanism that can be quickly shared with other staff and statewide strategy team members.

We are working to develop more depth and diversity in the communities in which we already have an organized group, plus making more contacts in new areas. The goal to eventually cover the entire state keeps us focused.

In terms of visibility, we have distributed more op-eds and letters to the editor in the last three months of 2005 than we did in the previous two years. We recruited two professional journalists to donate their time to copy edit the materials that are submitted, enabling us to distribute well-written pieces. More newspapers are using these

materials, in part due to the phone calls and visits we have been making to lobby these editors and explaining that our distribution system includes pieces by VOP and other groups.

In addition, we are constantly looking for more opportunities to “get VOP's name out there” — radio interviews, media releases, Cable TV shows, congregation bulletins, candidate forums and other public events.

Another new avenue that we are traveling is to work with Finger Lakes Production to produce a series of 60-second radio programs with the series title, the *Environminute*, to be broadcast on the radio nationally five times per week. This work is being done in conjunction with the Environmental Health Sciences.

In terms of leadership, we are being more deliberate about how this happens. VOP intentionally strengthens leadership in the organization in many ways:

Here's an example of how VOP's leadership development activities intersect with these issue campaigns. Kate Rosenfield is an adult education specialist. Seeing people every day in her classrooms who struggle in low-wage jobs, Kate put together an incredible presentation for VOP's constituent meeting with Delegate Rob Bell — a wonderful combination of research (citing various studies) and powerful stories from the lives of her students. When Delegate Bell summarily dismissed her request to support legislation to increase the minimum wage, Kate went into high gear. Energizing her students to get active, and working with others in her community, Kate coordinated a petition drive to collect more than 1,200 signatures in support of the measure.

- *Individuals dramatically increase their campaign strategy skills through organization and coordination of strategy teams. Each statewide issue campaign and each local issue*

campaign has a strategy team. Each strategy team deliberately includes individuals who have never served in such a capacity, along with those with more experience.

- *Thousands of people have learned more about how power works in their communities.* Our organizing staff and leaders are constantly doing one-to-one conversations in various communities throughout the state. These conversations center on what needs to be changed in a community and, inevitably, include discussions of power dynamics. The organizing staff also has done numerous trainings with new and emerging leaders in the chapters on how to build public relationships.
- *We assisted 85 other organizations in 2005 in organizational development and planning.* VOP commonly gets requests for consultations and holds individual meetings with leaders and staff of other organizations. VOP has staff people (plus attorneys, volunteer policy analysts and volunteers with other expertise) with many years of experience, and we see assisting to strengthen other groups as a key element of our work. This support ranges from advice on filing for tax-exempt status to strategies on working on mental health issues to working with a congregation to develop an anti-racism initiative.
- *We are also asked to facilitate major meetings and strategic planning sessions for various organizations.* For example, our staff coordinated a major strategic planning process for the National Coalition of Black Lung and Respiratory Disease Clinics. Our staff also facilitated a major planning meeting with the Virginia Forest Watch and at least a dozen other environmental and conservation organizations, developing the beginnings of a long-term plan for more effective organizing on forestry issues.

While VOP builds local groups, we are also holding local and regional workshops on diversity (race and sexual orientation), leadership skills

and understanding the economy. These workshops help individuals learn critical concepts and skills and also help us strengthen relationships within the statewide structure.

This year, VOP passed the 10,000 mark in terms of the number of participants in workshops on community organizing, leadership skills and dismantling racism. We held *Dismantling Racism* workshops in seven different locations throughout the year. We worked with new leaders in many of our chapters to develop skills for conducting one-to-one conversations and on how to hold meetings with legislators. We did workshops in many parts of the state on living wage and minimum wage issues and as part of the racial profiling campaign.



Dismantling Racism workshop participants are shown in the "Crossover" session.

Having extensive experience in our Dismantling Racism work, we share our session plans, workbook, and other materials with organizations throughout Virginia and in other parts of the country. In addition, VOP provides consulting assistance to a number of organizations in the region and nationally to develop strategic plans for dismantling racism work in those organizations.

In terms of making specific, tangible changes, we made great progress on many issues — racial profiling/biased-based policing, tax reform, living wage, minimum wage, partnership benefits for same sex couples, juvenile justice, restoration of former felons' voting rights, voter

participation, affordable housing, fair housing, education and accessibility. The following sections provide a summary of our campaigns.

**RACIAL PROFILING/BIASED-BASED
POLICING CAMPAIGN MOVES FORWARD**

Since VOP’s successful work at changing the voting rights restoration process for former felons in 2002, we have been working on the issue of racial profiling/bias-based policing. In our statewide campaign, we are calling for the collection of data giving the racial identity of people stopped on routine police traffic stops.

In 2005, Delegate Jeion Ward introduced a bill (House Bill 2735) calling for this type of data collection, and VOP worked to build support for the bill. VOP organized a press conference at the state capitol where a diverse group of residents spoke in support of Delegate Ward’s bill. Through this event, VOP was able to offer this public speaking opportunity to several members who had never before spoken at a media event.

A Community Speak-Out featuring an African-American performing group, Lyric Avenue, was held at the Virginia Holocaust Museum in Richmond. A number of people spoke about their own experience of racial profiling, and several white allies spoke about their experience of witnessing racial profiling.

As part of this campaign, local and developing chapters held face-to-face meetings with state Delegates in 25 House districts prior to the 2005 legislative session and with 45 delegates and senators in the fall of 2005. We also met with many local sheriffs and chiefs of police to build support for future policy changes. As a result, the bill attracted more support from legislators with numerous co-sponsors of the bill.

TAX REFORM UPDATE

VOP continued to move forward on tax reform issues in the General Assembly in 2005,

with a focus on accelerating the elimination of the state sales tax on food. In 2004, the General Assembly agreed to gradually reduce the state sales tax on food over a three-year period, phasing it out completely in 2007. Due to strong revenue performance in late 2004, however, both the Governor and Senate Finance Committee leaders supported speeding up the state food tax elimination. With all 100 of its seats up for re-election in November 2005, the House eliminated the sales tax on food effective July 1, 2005.



JeRoyd “Dyore” Strothers warms up the crowd with original poetry on social issues as part of Lyric Avenue’s performance at VOP’s annual meeting.

The VOP statewide tax reform committee worked on tax reform strategies and this campaign . . .

- 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 citizen understanding on issues of tax policy and its impact on local communities and the working poor
- deepened members’ relationships with state policymakers
- increased our understanding of the General Assembly’s inner workings that can improve our effectiveness in future campaigns

VOP works cooperatively with the Institute for Taxation and Economic Policy, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and United for a Fair Economy.

LIVING WAGE AND MINIMUM WAGE

VOP continued to provide strategy support to Living Wage campaigns already underway in Richmond, Blacksburg, the University of Virginia, the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg (where substantial changes were made), and Emory and Henry College in Emory (where an incremental change was made). In addition, VOP provided basic organizing assistance to students at Washington and Lee University in Lexington to form a Living Wage exploration committee in 2005.

More than 150,000 Virginians earn \$5.15 an hour. Most of these workers are full-time employees and most are adults with families to support. Increasing the minimum wage would ease the burdens on households and create greater family stability.

VOP played a key part in the Virginia Alliance for Worker Justice, a new partnership of religious, community and worker organizations working to get legislation introduced to increase the Virginia minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$8.15 an hour within three years. As a result of this work, VOP will coordinate legislative strategies in 2006 with key organizations pushing to raise Virginia's minimum wage, including the Virginia Coalition for the Homeless, SALT, Legal Aid Justice Center and Virginia Muslim Coalition for Public Affairs, among others.

PARTNERSHIP BENEFITS FOR SAME-SEX COUPLES

VOP supported Equality Virginia, the statewide LGBT group, in its successful effort to pass legislation in 2005 to allow private employers to offer health insurance and other benefits to



Virginia State University students lead a press conference on racial profiling in Petersburg on November 16, 2005.

domestic partners. This major victory took place in spite of a broader attack on the legal status of same-sex partners.

VOP strongly opposed the Affirmation of Marriage Bill, a proposal to expand the existing Virginia Defense of Marriage Act to prohibit all benefits similar to those provided by marriage to same-sex partners. Although the Affirmation of Marriage Bill died, a Constitutional Amendment Bill with similar provisions passed in the 2005 General Assembly. Under Virginia law, a constitutional amendment bill must pass twice, once in each sequential year with a general election intervening, before being put before the voters in a referendum. Much work remains for VOP members and organizational allies in 2006 to persuade Virginia legislators to get off the national bandwagon on constitutional amendments that harm the ability of same-sex partners to care for their families.

JUVENILE JUSTICE

VOP provided major consulting support this year to JustChildren, a legal aid group working on children's issues, to pass a statewide policy that requires the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice to develop regulations that provide mental health service transition plans for all incarcer-

ated juveniles prior to their re-entry into the community. This strategic work on juvenile justice policy allowed VOP to develop new working relationships with juvenile justice constituencies and organizations in Virginia.

RESTORATION OF FORMER FELONS' VOTING RIGHTS

VOP has continued to encourage former felons to apply for restoration of their voting rights under the streamlined application process VOP negotiated with the governor three years ago. As part of VOP's fall voter participation project, the Amherst and Lynchburg area chapters in particular targeted former felons for registration efforts. Linking up with a national effort sponsored by the Advancement Project in Washington, D.C., these VOP volunteers provided specially designed packets to former felons and helped those who needed assistance in filling out the restoration forms.

VOTER PARTICIPATION

Following up on VOP's successful statewide distribution of a voters' guide in 2004 through 118 organizations as well as VOP chapters, VOP distributed another voters' guide for the 2005 statewide elections as well. All 100 seats in the House of Delegates, as well as statewide offices for Governor, Lt. Governor, and Attorney General were up for election in November 2005. To build on VOP's ability to encourage non-partisan voter participation, the organization targeted key low-voter turnout precincts for door-to-door contact and special events.

VOP also sponsored the first of the election cycle's candidates' forums for the contested

House District 57 and 58 seats in the spring, co-sponsored with the Interfaith Gay-Straight Alliance and Equality Virginia.

LOCAL ISSUES

In local campaign news, the Williamsburg VOP Chapter continues to push for an inclusionary zoning ordinance in Williamsburg and James City County. Inclusionary zoning is the process of setting aside affordable units in new housing developments.

The Petersburg VOP Chapter continues to follow through on their successful campaign to push the city to hire a Fair Housing Officer. At the city's request, the VOP chapter elected a representative and an alternate to serve on the interview committee.

The new Washington County VOP chapter was welcomed at the Annual Meeting in Richmond. The group is researching education issues and also supports the work of RAIL Solution, a regional organization along the Interstate 81 corridor in western Virginia that promotes improving rail transportation as an alternative to proposals to widen Interstate 81.

VOP worked with the Independence Resource Center to do a survey of each school in Charlottesville in terms of accessibility. As a result of the surveys, the city maintenance department has made many improvements to the schools, while longer-term projects are being worked into the capital improvements budget. This project now serves as a model for how other school districts can deal with accessibility issues.

Two chapters in the Shenandoah Valley and the Roanoke chapter have identified housing as

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.

critical and they will develop campaigns to address these issues in 2006.

MAJOR ORGANIZATIONAL EXPANSION

Over the years, the Virginia Organizing Project has accepted grants and donations on behalf of a wide range of new and emerging groups. This year, we brought many of these groups into a more formal working relationship by developing new program areas. The new approach will mean closer coordination of all of our efforts on the environment, transportation, human rights and community support.

We met with the boards/leaders of the 21 groups that we asked to join us. Believing that they were ready to move beyond VOP just handling their finances to developing ways that we can work together for long-term change, we completed a “Joint Plan of Work” format to make it clear what we would do together.

This major organizational expansion is really exciting. It will allow VOP to have a presence in more parts of the state and in more issue areas while enhancing the work of all the groups. In April 2006, the VOP State Governing Board will meet with key leaders of VOP chapters, key leaders of the groups with whom we are doing Joint Plans of Work, and key leaders in other organizations to begin to map out a serious strategy of statewide policy reforms we are seeking.

DATABASE IMPROVEMENTS

A new addition to VOP’s capacity is in the works with a shift to a database that is hosted by the databank. This will allow remote access by all the staff (so they can enter in updates on the basic information, as well as put in notes about individuals and their interests after they do one-to-ones with them). In addition, subscribers will be able to maintain their own records, which will save VOP staff a tremendous amount of time. Subscribers will also be able to check-off which

issue interests they have and this will allow us to do targeted e-mail action alerts and targeted mailings.

In addition, the new database will allow us to integrate our e-mail action alert system with our web site, and we will know how many people respond to the action alerts. This means that an organizer can keep track of (a) an individual’s interests (and the individual can also tell us their interests through the subscriber page), (b) their attendance at meetings and workshops, and (c) their responses to action alerts. Collectively, we will have more data about the number of people who are interested in a particular issue, as well as how many people are responding to alerts. The new database will allow organizers to put all this information in a savable — and reusable — format that will be backed up daily.

GRASSROOTS FUNDRAISING

We have a diverse funding stream and future plans call for an even more diverse one. In addition to grants, individual donations continue to increase, including multi-year pledges. We also raise funds through cell phone donations, Kroger cards, book and t-shirts sales, interest income, ads, contracted services, registrations, endowment donations, and rental income from groups who are in the Charlottesville office. We raised more than \$200,000 in grassroots fundraising (non-grant sources) in 2005.

In addition, we continue to get donated office furniture, cars and computer equipment. We also save a lot by bartering for repairs to our copiers, computers, printers and telephone systems.

2005 ANNUAL MEETING

On April 9, VOP held the 2005 Annual Meeting at Linwood Holton Elementary School in Richmond. VOP State Governing Board Chairperson Jay Johnson opened the meeting. She spoke to a diverse audience representing dif-

ferent communities from around the state using a theme from Aretha Franklin's song "You better think about what you're trying to do to me." She encouraged people to be engaged in their communities and in the issues that need to be addressed by state delegate and gubernatorial races in Virginia.

Octavia Ware presented a multi-media presentation highlighting VOP's accomplishments during 2004. Robin Williams of United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 400 thanked VOP for our support for fair wages and health benefits for Kroger employees. After lunch, VOP celebrated its 10th Birthday with a cake and a song.

INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Another area of Leadership Development that is a priority for VOP involves addressing the needs of young people who want to know more about how change happens in society. In VOP's Internship Program, we work with high school and college students, developing leaders who will be able to meet the needs of another generation. We also increased the number of interns this year. Our goals include providing youth with the opportunity to develop democratic and leadership skills while engaging in a hands-on, multi-generational community organizing effort. They are able to make a personal contribution to the strategic work of social change aimed at a variety of issues, including economic security, anti-racism



*VOP Interns Victoria Young, Abby Bellows
and Kevin Simowitz*

initiatives, handicap accessibility and the environment. Each local chapter is encouraged to develop conversations with youth in their communities and involve them in their organizing work.

VOP continues to engage young people in organizing activities around the state. In 2005, we worked with students at Virginia State University in Petersburg and at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, in addition to our work with students at the University of Virginia and Charlottesville area high schools. We continue to assist students on several campuses to organize living wage campaigns on a consultation basis. Through this work, more students are choosing to be involved in activities for progressive change.

A recent high school graduate who participated in our Internship Program wrote of his experience: "It's an amazing opportunity for a young adult to really become involved in her or his community. Rather than just have it serve them, it teaches them how to have a voice in what happens around them." Adam Turner is now enrolled in college, staying active in social change work and preparing for a career that will include work in addressing policy issues. Other VOP interns have gone on to full-time careers in organizing; previous VOP interns are currently working as organizers in Virginia, Florida, Pennsylvania, New York and California.

One intern updated our statewide media contact list which we share freely with other organizations in the state. Two other interns helped organize a Hunger Banquet, while another worked on a project to purchase a used bookmobile, which will be filled with books and computers, and given to a community devastated by the Katrina and Rita hurricanes.

ALSO OF NOTE...

- ✓ Virginia natives Beverly Sell and Barry Butler were hired as organizers. Bev has an

extensive marketing background and Barry has run major electoral campaigns in several other states.

- ✓ We published three more issue of our news magazine, *virginia.organizing*, which has a circulation of more than 7,000.
- ✓ We greatly improved our web site, www.virginia-organizing.org.
- ✓ All staff people attended trainings to learn additional skills.
- ✓ We continued to distribute e-mail action alerts to our growing statewide list on environmental issues, workers' rights, sexual orientation, rights of undocumented workers, racial profiling, tax reform and transportation issues. These alerts supported VOP's cam-

paigns as well as those of other organizations.

- ✓ We distributed more used computer equipment (at least 50 systems and 10 printers) to other non-profits and low-income families.
- ✓ In addition to continuing work with 20 organizations on tax reform and forging new working relationships with local NAACP branches in Staunton and Northern Virginia on racial profiling this year, VOP expanded its relationships with Muslim and Latin American organizations. The president of the Virginia Muslim Coalition and other Muslim leaders served as key spokespeople at VOP's racial profiling rally in Richmond this spring and new Latino organizations participated in organizing district chapters in the Shenandoah Valley.

Virginia Organizing Project State Governing Board

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Secretary
Petersburg

Laura Lawson
Dryden

Denise Smith
Rocky Gap

Jason Guard
Richmond

Jon Liss
Alexandria

Karen Waters
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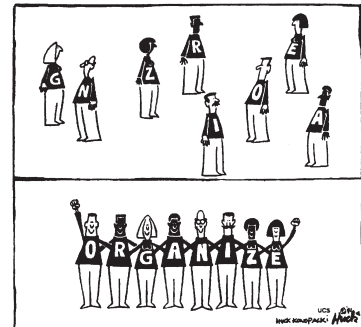
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