



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

## *2008 Annual Report*



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## VIRGINIA ORGANIZING PROJECT 2008 ANNUAL REPORT



www.virginia-organizing.org

Dear friends,

In 2008 the Virginia Organizing Project took a giant leap forward in organizing Virginians to action, and unprecedented participation in the elections resulted in historic change. VOP brought together 13 statewide organizations to form the Virginia c-3 Table, a group focused on non-partisan civic engagement activities in the state. It was the first time that most of the largest peoples organizations in Virginia came together in a formal way for a common purpose.

For the 2008 Summer Civic Engagement Project, VOP hired 50 interns, who, along with hundreds of volunteers, knocked on more than 140,000 doors across the state. All together, VOP distributed 300,000 copies of our 32-page non-partisan voter guide. Our interns received a living wage and a priceless education!

The Virginia Organizing Project, in conjunction with the Virginia c-3 Table and other groups:

- notified the Virginia Department of Social Services that they were not in compliance with the National Voter Registration Act of 1993; DSS then rapidly made major improvements in their voter registration systems; VOP worked with Demos, NAACP, Project Vote and Democracy South to make this important change.
- conducted voter protection training and get-out-the-vote activities including distributing non-partisan door hangers and voter empowerment cards, phone banking, putting voter information in small businesses and on college campuses, tabling at public events and providing rides to the polls; turnout percentages were up substantially in the precincts where we focused our efforts.

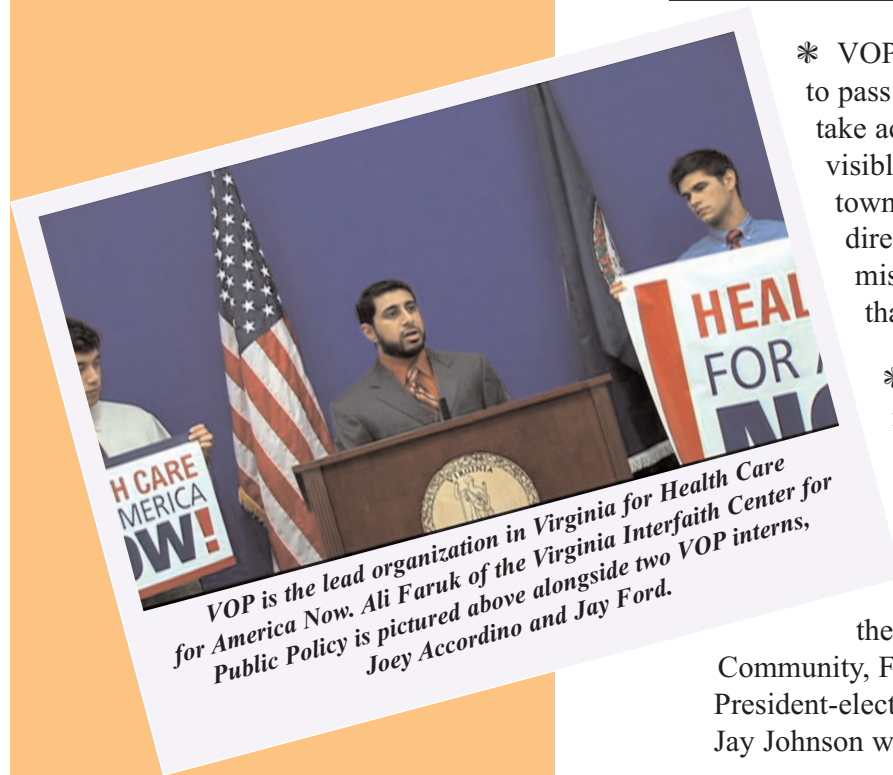
It has long been a VOP goal to have groups work together, and our grassroots power is increasing as a result.

We are seizing opportunities in this historic transition period to advance our agenda instead of staying back and playing defense. For example, VOP published a Recommended Blueprint for Virginia's Response to the 2008-2010 Revenue Shortfall to give the General Assembly and the Governor specific ideas to address the current shortfalls while making the tax system fairer.

This Annual Report contains highlights of the Virginia Organizing Project's work in 2008. Our website contains a more complete list of accomplishments. We look forward to increasing our staff, strengthening our web of relationships, deepening leadership skills and celebrating more successes in our push for social justice and a healthier environment. We welcome your support, which is vital for achieving these goals.

Janice "Jay" Johnson  
Chairperson

# Building a Grassroots Power Base



*VOP is the lead organization in Virginia for Health Care for America Now. Ali Faruk of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy is pictured above alongside two VOP interns, Joey Accordino and Jay Ford.*



*Fifty VOP staff and leaders attended the Realizing the Promise forum with President-Elect Barack Obama's transition staff; VOP Chairperson Jay Johnson participated in a roundtable discussion.*

- \* VOP helped get a record 67 local governments to pass resolutions asking the state legislature to take action on the abuses of payday lenders, had a visible presence at all of Governor Tim Kaine's town hall meetings across the state, and held direct actions at payday loan sites; the compromise legislation resulted in some provisions that work toward breaking the cycle of debt.

- \* The town of Berryville changed its ordinance after the ACLU threatened to sue on VOP's behalf for being overly restrictive in regulating the right of people to peaceably assemble.

- \* 50 VOP staff and leaders attended the Realizing the Promise Forum on Community, Faith and Democracy with members of President-elect Obama's transition team; VOP Chairperson Jay Johnson was a featured speaker at a forum roundtable.

- \* VOP held a power analysis weekend with VOP leaders, board members and staff as well as representatives of other Virginia non-profit groups.

- \* VOP co-sponsored Power Up Petersburg with the Legal Aid Justice Center, Richmond Community Action Program, Gamaliel Foundation and Local Initiatives Support Corporation to build leadership skills, increase involvement in local community-based initiatives, and encourage a collaborative approach to community work.

- \* VOP joined forces with Voices for Virginia's Children and other groups in forming the Working Families Child Care Coalition; the Coalition supported the Governor's budget initiatives to increase federal TANF funds to address child care subsidy needs.

- \* VOP worked for legislation that now requires the Virginia Department of Social Services to provide notice of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit to all applicants and recipients of public assistance.

*The Virginia Organizing Project (VOP), founded in 1995, 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 Virginia, VOP enhances their ability to work together at a statewide level, democratically and non-violently, for change.*

- \* VOP worked with the Commonwealth Institute to defeat a bill that would have favored large companies with out-of-state business at the expense of smaller establishments.
- \* VOP supported the City of Charlottesville and the Charlottesville school system to increase their living wage.
- \* Three VOP grassroots leaders attended a media training in New York City with the Center for Community Change to become national spokespeople for the Campaign for Community Values.
- \* Representatives of the Virginia Organizing Project, Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, Virginia AFL-CIO and Virginia League of Conservation Voters briefed Governor Tim Kaine on the Summer 2008 Civic Engagement Project and future coalition efforts.
- \* VOP held a meeting, along with four other groups, with the Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates to outline issues for the 2009 legislative session including health care reform, the need to pay personal care assistants more, education and the environment. (This meant that all the groups that participated are part of a “multi-issue” approach, allowing us to extend the breadth and depth of those pushing for health care reform.)
- \* VOP worked on a Memorandum of Understanding between VOP and the Williamsburg Area Association of Realtors to line out common work with VOP’s organizing for affordable workforce housing.
- \* We held a wide range of workshops, such as a General Assembly 101 training workshop with a local group in Lebanon working on addiction issues and a Community Organizing (weekend) workshop with participants from Roanoke, Alexandria, Fairfax, Richmond, Danville and Charlottesville.
- \* We held the annual VOP Leadership Institute (four weekends) to build a larger network of grassroots leaders across the state.
- \* Our leaders and staff made a variety of presentations and workshops on community organizing, including those to Virginia Community Action agency planners and educators of the Virginia Education Association and at the Annual Conference on Neighborhood Concerns; spoke to interns at the Phoenix Project on how non-profits work, did a training for the Charlottesville VOP Chapter on building public relationships; held a community organizing training for a class of University of Virginia students titled “Women’s Leadership, Feminist Organizing and Social Change.”

### *Health Care Reform*

Virginia Organizing Project serves as the lead organization in Virginia for Health Care for America Now, a national coalition pushing for health care reform.

- \* Working with many other groups, VOP succeeded in having the following Members of Congress endorse the Health Care for America Now principles: Senator Mark Warner and Representatives Tom Perriello, Jim Moran and Gerry Connolly.
- \* VOP sponsored community health care forums in 12 localities to discuss critical health care problems, failings in the system and possible policy solutions.



*Tasha Wiley, one of 50 VOP interns who walked a lot of miles as they knocked on 140,000 doors over the summer.*

***In 2008, VOP had:***

- 60 constituent meetings with legislators
- 49 trainings on leadership development
  - 7 Dismantling Racism workshops
- 797 workshop and training participants
- 364 leaders who used a new skill to improve their communities
  - 678 one-to-one conversations with new people
    - 104 interns
- 201 consultations with other groups
- 71 cities and counties in which we worked
- 24 forums on health care, payday lending, or candidates running for public office
  - 10 direct actions on payday lending, marriage rights and health care reform

- \* We implemented a strategy to generate grassroots support to increase coverage for poor parents (at the state level) and to expand the SCHIP program to include more children, including immigrant children (at the federal level).
- \* VOP helped organize the Virginia portion of the national “Road to American Health Care” bus tour sponsored by SEIU.
- \* We recorded video interviews of eight people telling their health care stories for the Health Rights Organizing Project of the Center for Community Change.
- \* Our interns set up a Google system to track health care stories from across Virginia.
- \* We established a VOP statewide Health Care Reform Strategy Committee.
- \* VOP leaders worked to get a Drug Court established in House District 1 in southwest Virginia.
- \* We had dozens of people write letters to the editor and op-eds for newspapers across the state. Some of our members were interviewed by a Swedish newspaper for a feature story on U.S. health care.
- \* Governor Tim Kaine’s biennial budget reflected modest goals that were supported by the Health Care Reform Coalition, of which VOP is an active member; even these efforts achieved only limited success because of a very tight state budget.
- \* VOP worked with Families USA to release six national reports on needed health care reform and to get organizations to sign on to a letter to the McCain and Obama campaigns, encouraging them to make health care a priority during their campaigns.

- \* VOP held an action outside the Anthem insurance company headquarters to press Anthem to become part of the solution to get quality, affordable health care for all Virginians.
- \* We mailed thousands of health care post cards and organized leaders, volunteers, interns and staff to make thousands of calls to legislators calling for health care reform.

***Immigrant and Worker Rights***

- \* VOP participated in defeating a measure that would have given law enforcement officers the unfettered authority to arrest individuals and take them into custody when they

## VOP State Governing Board

*Sandra Cook, Vice-Chairperson • Jason Guard, Treasurer •  
Janice "Jay" Johnson, Chairperson • Ladelle McWhorter, Secretary •  
Jodi Mincemoyer • Denise Smith • Kristen Tilley • Karen Waters*

are charged with a Class I or II misdemeanor and required their arrest if they did not stop the unlawful act.

### *Dismantling Racism*

- \* VOP moved the Racial Profiling Campaign forward by meeting with the new chair of the Senate Courts of Justice Committee, who agreed to support the budget amendment calling for a new position at the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services to deal with bias-based policing; dismal revenue projections prevented implementation.

### *Environmental Issues*

- \* VOP joined nine other groups and a Shenandoah County farmer in a federal lawsuit to block plans to widen Interstate 81 to eight or more lanes through much of western Virginia.
- \* VOP interns distributed more than 800 free compact fluorescent light bulbs in low-income neighborhoods.

## *Raising the Bar in Organizing Capacity*

In terms of expanding our staff, in 2008 we hired a new organizer and two new apprentice organizers.

This year VOP continued building:

- ❖ a statewide e-mail action alert system linking organizations and individuals so they can work more effectively together on social justice and environmental issues;
- ❖ *virginia.organizing*, a news magazine with a circulation of 10,000 that provides news of the good work of grassroots leaders from VOP and other groups in the state, and has sections on organizing skills in English and Spanish;

- ❖ the VOP web site, [www.virginia-organizing.org](http://www.virginia-organizing.org), with links to other organizations, RSS feeds and information resources;
- ❖ an op-ed, letter to the editor and media release distribution system to 125 newspapers as well as all TV and radio stations across the state;
- ❖ participation in the Public News Service, which broadcasts radio spots across Virginia;
- ❖ the Used Computer Project which has placed more than 1,600 computers, as well as printers, fax machines, copiers, typewriters and scanners in the hands of non-profit groups and individuals who could not otherwise afford such equipment;
- ❖ a diverse grassroots fundraising program that involves all staff members and encourages grassroots leaders to raise funds for VOP, and which includes donated vehicles and office equipment and barter networks to reduce repair costs;
- ❖ resources on community organizing by publishing *Lessons From the Field: Organizing In Rural Communities*, edited by Joe Szakos and Kristin Layng Szakos; and,
- ❖ a Facebook page as a way to engage new youth in organizing.



*RAIL Solution works for a rail alternative to widening I-81.*

# *Borrowing and Sharing Power to Work for the Common Good*



*Members of The Clinch Coalition take a break from working on the Chief Benge Scout Trail in Scott and Wise counties.*

VOP had a formal Joint Plan of Work with these groups in 2008, providing administrative support so they can spend their time and energy on their missions. To see their accomplishments this year, contact them directly or check out the VOP website.

- ❖ Adopt a Soldier
- ❖ Advancing Green Chemistry
- ❖ Blue Ridge Radio Project
- ❖ Camping for All
- ❖ Community Bikes
- ❖ Community Obesity Task Force
- ❖ Community Organizing Writing Project
- ❖ Earth Week Charlottesville
- ❖ Environmental Health Sciences
- ❖ Families and Allies of Virginia's Youth
- ❖ First Street Church Project
- ❖ Food Not Bombs
- ❖ Foothills Child Advocacy Center
- ❖ Help Winneba Read
- ❖ Interfaith Gay/Straight Alliance
- ❖ Piedmont Sustainable Woods
- ❖ Public Housing Association of Residents
- ❖ Quinn Dam Project
  - ❖ RAIL Solution
  - ❖ Richmond Tenants Organization
  - ❖ Rooms for a Reason
  - ❖ Science Communications Network
  - ❖ SHEA Collaborative
  - ❖ Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards
  - ❖ The Bridge
  - ❖ The Clinch Coalition
  - ❖ The People United
  - ❖ Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness
  - ❖ Virginia Forest Watch
  - ❖ Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty
  - ❖ Westhaven Afterschool Program
  - ❖ Westhaven Clinic Coalition



*Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards hands off petitions demanding clean energy choices in Virginia.*

## *Current VOP Staff*

- Sally Bastian, Grassroots Fundraising Coordinator* • *Barry Butler, Organizer*
- *Harold Folley, Organizer* • *Ben Greenberg, Legislative Director* • *Brian Johns, Organizer*
- *Sharon LaMar, Organizer* • *Michele Mattioli, Special Projects Coordinator*
- *Tammi Nichols, Apprentice Organizer* • *Laura Ramirez, Office Manager*
- *Tommy Roberts, Apprentice Organizer* • *Kevin Simowitz, Organizer*
- *Joe Szakos, Executive Director* • *Ben Thacker-Gwaltney, Lead Organizer*
- *Cathy Woodson, Organizer* • *Larry Yates, Organizer*

## *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.
- We believe that physical and mental health are parts of personal and community well-being; we believe that Virginians have a broad public health and economic interest in ensuring that adequate care is available to low- and moderate-income residents.

