

Tips for Effective and Engaging Legislative Visits

Effective and engaging legislative visits are conversations- but they happen in a very limited time frame. In that time you want to communicate your most important points/stories, make an ask of the legislator, and listen and record the person's response. Here are some tips:

Be Prepared

- Read through any materials/resources relevant to the purpose of your visit. Sometimes you will be given talking points, but the VICPP website (www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org) is also a good place to look for resources.
- Pivoting is important. If a conversation is being derailed, pivot back to the main points of your meeting.
- Prepare to make an ask. For example- will the legislator support/co-patron any of the bills you discussed? Be sure you know what bill numbers are under discussion, although sometimes they are not yet available.
- Prepare to follow up. Take notes that can be passed on to the VICPP team.

Be Principled

- Weight impacted persons' experiences with the same importance as learned expertise on the issue.
- Use people-first/asset-based language and lens. People-first language means respecting others as whole individuals, not merely defined by one experience (for example: "people who are experiencing homelessness" rather than "homeless people").
- Legislative meetings are not zero-sum games – there is no winner or loser! Affirmation and respect for all involved are key.

Be Communicative

- Step-up/ step back: If you are a person who tends to sit in the background and let others talk, step up and share why this issue is important to you. If you are a person who tends to dominate a conversation, step back and make space for others to talk.
- Prioritize story-telling over listing facts and figures (but make sure the stories are short and sweet!)
- Listen to the legislators/legislative staff but ensure speaking time is being shared equitably between constituents and staff.
- In case a meeting is cut short or needs to be rescheduled, leave behind a fact sheet and contact information to continue the conversation.

*** Take a photo to share with VICPP by emailing it to Director of Communications Ayesha Gilani Taylor (ayashaGT@virginiainterfaithcenter.org) and on social media (tag us @vainterfaith)**

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES FOR 2023



Detailed fact sheets are available at www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org

Criminal Justice Reform (Key staff: Salim Khalfani)

- **Limit the use of solitary confinement.** VICPP is leading the faith advocacy in the Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement to limit time in isolation to less than 15 days.
- **End profiteering in jails.** Prisons and jails charge outrageous prices for phone calls, emails, and basic toiletries. VICPP is supporting a bill from the ACLU to limit this practice.

Health Equity (with a focus on maternal health in 2023) (Key staff: Dora Muhammad)

- **Unconscious bias training requirement.** VICPP is supporting a bill to add unconscious (implicit) bias training as a criterion for health care professionals who work with people who are expecting or of birthing age.
- **Plan for expanding perinatal health hub model.** Bill would form a workgroup to address maternal health care deserts in Virginia.
- **Authorize drugs for midwives to save lives.** Top causes of preventable pregnancy-related deaths could be reduced by authorizing midwives to carry and use two typical drugs.

Worker and Family Support (Key staff: Jase Hatcher)

- **Protecting the minimum wage.**
- **Paid sick days.** VICPP and the Virginians for Paid Sick Days coalition won paid sick days for 30,000 home health care aides in 2021, but Virginia needs a standard for all 1.2 million workers without paid sick days.
- **Child care assistance.** VICPP will support child care assistance for families with low incomes.

Affordable Housing (Key staff: Sheila Herlihy)

- **Increase money for affordable housing (as proposed by Virginia Housing Alliance and Virginia Poverty Law Center):**
 - **\$75 million to the Virginia Housing Trust Fund** to build more affordable housing and help prevent homelessness.
 - **\$738 million to the Housing Stability Fund** to fund a rental voucher program to assist families with low incomes.
 - **\$12.5 million to the Virginia Eviction Reduction Program (VERP)** to reduce evictions with short-term financial assistance to at-risk renters or homeowners.
- **Improve tenant protections.** In 2022, several commonsense tenant protections that had broad bi-partisan support were vetoed. VICPP will support these again.
- **Support reforms to increase supply of affordable housing.** VICPP will be reviewing the Governor's proposals and will support ones sought by nonprofit housing developers.

Other

- **Commonsense gun reforms.**
- **Defending past gains, such as in-state tuition for immigrant students, and minimum wage increases.**

The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy (VICPP) advocates racial, social, and economic justice in Virginia's policies and practices through education, prayer, and action. VICPP is a non-partisan coalition of more than 750 faith communities working for a more just society.

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Maternal Health in the 2023 General Assembly

Problem: Black women in Virginia are dying in preventable pregnancy-related deaths at alarmingly higher rates than any other group, higher than national average.

According to Virginia's Maternal Mortality Review Team, the majority (51%) of pregnancy-related deaths in Virginia result from provider-related factors—and not underlying health conditions. An alarming correlation is the recent CDC estimation that 90 percent of maternal deaths are preventable. We need to support and sustain innovative, proven strategies and new paradigms of maternal care delivery to mitigate preventable deaths and eliminate racial disparities in maternal care.

ACCESS: HB 1567 Rasoul

Creating Workgroup to Develop Plan to Expand Perinatal Health Hub Model: This bill would direct the Virginia Neonatal Perinatal Collaborative (which is funded by the General Assembly), in collaboration with the Virginia Maternal Quality Care Alliance and Urban Baby Beginnings, to form a workgroup to develop a five-year plan to expand the perinatal health hub model to address the growing span of maternal health care deserts resulting from the closure of labor and delivery wards of major health systems. UBB currently runs hubs in Central Virginia and Hampton Roads, which reported better birth and health outcomes for children despite barriers to care during the COVID pandemic. The hub is a community-based model of connecting health care and other resource providers to support the maternal health needs as well as wraparound family

services to address the unique social determinants of health of the community it serves.

BIAS: HB 1734 Head & Maldonado/SB

1440 Locke & Hashmi Establishing

Implicit Bias Training Licensing Criterion for Perinatal Health Care Professionals:

Continued from the 2022 Regular Session, this bill establishes two hours of continuing education in implicit bias or cultural competency every other biennium licensing renewal cycle for all practitioners who have direct contact with birthing people who are expecting or of childbearing age. Several states report significant, and even historic, reduction in the racial disparities of maternal and infant mortality and overall improvement of birth outcomes as a result of implementing this policy change.

COVERAGE: HB 1511 Adams, D./SB 1275

Dunnivant Authorizing Licensed

Midwives to Carry and Administer

Medications: The Virginia Midwife Alliance is seeking authorization for licensed midwives to carry and administer medications. Certified Professional Midwives, who work in freestanding birthing centers, are not permitted to give maternity patients typical drugs administered during labor to ensure safe deliveries. According to the CDC, the top two causes of preventable pregnancy-related deaths are hemorrhaging and preeclampsia, which can be mitigated respectively by the administration of Pitocin and oxygen.

FACT SHEET



Solitary/Isolated Confinement: 2023 General Assembly

The Problem: According to the Virginia Department of Corrections' (VADOC's) own numbers, more than 7,000 people incarcerated in Virginia prisons were placed in solitary confinement units known as "restrictive housing" at some point between July 1, 2018, and June 30, 2019. That number does not include people placed in solitary confinement conditions through other types of housing units in Virginia prisons, let alone Virginia jails or juvenile detention facilities.

What is Solitary Confinement: Solitary confinement is the isolation of a person in a jail or prison cell for all or nearly all day with little environmental stimulation or opportunity for human interaction. Though VADOC has changed what it is called many times, the inhumane practice remains the same. Solitary confinement is considered at least 20 hours per day in isolation away from the rest of the prison population for adults. People who were formerly incarcerated routinely describe people being put in lengthy solitary confinement for minor rule infractions. Tyquine Lee, 28, spent more than 600 days in solitary confinement at Red Onion prison in Virginia from 2016 to 2018. Red Onion is a supermax prison treated as an "end of the line" facility within the penal system. Such excessive use of solitary confinement is torture.

The Solution: SB887/Morrissey. (No HB as of this printing.) Solitary/isolated confinement should be prohibited except in rare circumstances — such as when an incarcerated person poses a real and imminent threat of physical harm — and only for as little time as necessary. VICPP supports bills patroned by Del. Glenn Davis (R) and Sen. Joseph Morrissey (D). The bills will make Virginia safer and more just by requiring Virginia prisons and jails to consider humane alternatives before implementing this dehumanizing and barbaric practice that is known to exacerbate and even cause serious mental illness. The bills limit the use of solitary/isolated confinement to no more than 15 days.

Mental Health Impact: Incarcerated people who experience solitary confinement are considerably more likely to develop mental health issues than those in the general prison population. VADOC reported that 26% of incarcerated people have mental health issues. People in solitary confinement are diagnosed with a range of disorders such as bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder because of abuse, manic depression, and schizophrenia amid other mental illnesses.

Financial Impact: According to the national estimate, the cost is \$75,000 per incarcerated person in solitary confinement. Despite this high cost per person, there is little or no evidence showing that solitary confinement makes prisons safer. In fact, these conditions may be more of a threat to the Commonwealth's public safety.

State Changes: New Jersey restricted "isolated [or solitary] confinement" to no more than 20 days and only for people between the ages of 21 and 65 last year. It also bans solitary confinement for people who are pregnant, postpartum, and have serious medical and/or psychological conditions, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Recreational and rehabilitative interventions during the short period of time when incarcerated people in solitary confinement are allowed to exit their cells are required.

New York passed The Humane Alternatives to Long Term Solitary Confinement Act (HALT), which bans the use of solitary confinement for those with mental or physical disabilities, people aged under 21 or over 55, and pregnant or postpartum people. The new law restricts prisons and jails from holding people in solitary confinement for more than 15 consecutive days.

Sources: ACLU of Virginia, Business Insider, Interfaith Action for Human Rights, Prison Policy Initiative, Silent Injustice: Solitary Confinement in Virginia, Mental Health Institution - Virginia Department of Corrections, The New York Times

FACT SHEET



Stop Profiteering in Virginia's Prisons

Problems: For most consumers, emails and phone calls are “free” with people’s internet or phone service plans. In Virginia’s prisons, those incarcerated are charged excessive fees for communication services and inflated prices for items purchased at commissaries. Emails are \$.25 each if purchased in bulk, or \$.39 each if only five emails are purchased. Calls are \$.0409 per minute (\$2.45 per hour). Video calls are \$4 for 20 minutes. The costs are primarily borne by the families of incarcerated people. Virginians spent more than \$50 million on commissary, telephone calls, video communications and media in VADOC in 2021. **One in three families** with an incarcerated member goes into debt in order to be able to communicate with them. The families of incarcerated people are disproportionately low-income families.

Those incarcerated need regular communication with children, parents, and loved ones. Regular communication supports the well being and mental health of those who are incarcerated and reduces recidivism of those who get released because they have been able to maintain family and community ties. Children have less trauma and improved outcomes if they can talk regularly with their incarcerated parents. Discouraging communication because of the exorbitant fees is costly to families and society and short-sighted in terms of recidivism.

The reason why costs for basic communication and goods in the commissaries are so high is because well-connected firms are allowed to earn extravagant profits in exchange for commissions (kickbacks) to the prisons. Some sheriffs in Virginia have even received training cruises in the Caribbean as part of the contracts.

Other states have developed approaches that allow for free or very low-cost emails, telephone calls, and video calls, thus allowing those incarcerated to stay

in regular contact with friends and family members without creating financial hardships.

Legislative Background: In the 2022 General Assembly, two bills (SB441 and HB665) passed to create a taskforce to review recommendations to eliminate or reduce the costs and fees to people incarcerated in the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC). The taskforce met throughout the summer and developed many recommendations to reduce exorbitant fees and unnecessary costs. Even though there was broad agreement on the desire to reduce costs for families of incarcerated people, VADOC and community organizations representing people who are incarcerated and their families were not able to reach a consensus on most of the recommendations. In 2023, VICPP supports SB887 (Morrissey). At the time of this printing, the House Bill had not yet been filed.

2023 Legislative Proposal: VICPP supports bills and budget amendments to:

- Provide no cost calls to people incarcerated or their family members.
- Increase the number of people on call lists from 15 to 20.
- Disallow VADOC commissions (kickbacks) from telephone, email, and electronic visitation contracts.
- Limit upcharges in commissaries to 10 percent of the typical market rate charges for comparable goods.
- Provide work history, educational documents, and medical documents without fees to those being released from prison.
- Limit the charges for electronic visiting to actual costs.
- Establish personal trust accounts without predatory fees for when people are released from prison.

Primary source: Report from the taskforce, entitled Reduction or Elimination of Costs and Fees Charged to Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, Oct 1, 2022.

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Affordable Housing Funding— Addressing Virginia’s Crisis

Problem:

Low- and moderate-income families struggle to find affordable housing in Virginia. According to the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, 71 percent of very low-income Virginians spend more than half their incomes on housing. According to the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC), approximately 29 percent of households (around 905,000 families) were cost burdened as of 2019. With thousands of families on backlogged waitlists for public housing programs, ***Virginia must address its housing supply and affordability crises.***

Home prices in Virginia have risen 28 percent over the past four years, while median household incomes have only risen an estimated 6 percent (not accounting for inflation). High home ownership costs have forced many Virginians to rent, however Virginia’s statewide shortage of at least 200,000 affordable rental units makes finding housing difficult for low to middle-income Virginians. The Virginia Association of Realtors also reported an 11.3 percent increase in rents over the past year, which is only expected to rise.

Solution:

VICPP advocates increased budget investments into community-based programs that will increase housing supply and assist low-income Virginians.

Build more affordable housing units (Sen. Marsden, Del. Bulova). VICPP supports the Virginia Housing Alliance proposal to invest an additional \$75 million in Virginia’s Housing Trust Fund (VHTF) to build affordable housing and help prevent homelessness. Although the most recent budget allocated a

historically large investment over the 2022-2023 biennium, these funds aren’t enough to cover the immense costs of housing development (exponentially increased due to supply-chain issues and inflation). Virginia’s current shortage requires a major increase in housing supply that cannot be achieved with the funds currently allocated.

Invest in the Housing Stability Fund (Sen. Locke, Sen. McClellan, Del. Coyner, Del. Maldonado). Both JLARC and a General Assembly housing study authorized in 2020 recommend the creation of a state administered voucher program. Such a program would provide long-term rental assistance to ensure housing costs for low-income Virginians do not exceed 30 percent of their actual income. An investment of at least \$90 million added to this year’s budget would support a pilot program, and \$738 million would assist almost 61,000 families. This represents 5 percent of the gap in housing vouchers currently available in Virginia. Partners at the Virginia Housing Alliance and Virginia Poverty Law Center are also working on this initiative.

Increase Virginia Eviction Reduction Program (VERP) funding (Sen. Ebbin, Del. Bulova). VERP is a pilot program in its third year dedicated to preventing eviction through short-term financial assistance to at-risk renters or homeowners. Though only a pilot, it has helped numerous Virginians stay in their homes and reported lower eviction rates in the pilot localities. VERP is currently allocated about \$3 million annually through DHCD. VICPP supports the Virginia Poverty Law Center’s recommendation of at least \$12.5 million in additional funds.

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Affordable Housing – Tenant Protections

Problem:

People with lower incomes tend to rent instead of owning homes. When it comes to housing, most tenants aren't familiar with their rights. More than 10,000 eviction judgements were entered in Virginia courts in the third quarter of 2022. People of faith recognize the need to stand with the poor, and want to see those who rent treated fairly.

Solution:

Virginia's legislature must pass legislation offering protections for renters and strengthening existing tenants' rights.

Pass HB 1652 (Del. Price): Expands pay-or-quit period from 5 to 14 days.

Pass HB 1830 (Del. Torian): Expands pay-or-quit period from 5 to 14 days.

Pass SB 1330 (Sen. McClellan, Sen. Locke): Expands pay-or-quit period from 5 to 14 days.

These bills would put a protection in the path of evictions. The first step of eviction proceedings is a letter saying a tenant has five days to pay the back rent or leave the premises. Although it is true that this "pay-or-quit" letter is only the first step of an eviction and tenants have at least a month to pay back rent, many renters don't realize this. Renters will often vacate the property from fear of legal action. The pay-or-quit period should be permanently expanded to 14 days, which gives tenants an opportunity to learn their rights and get money together.

Pass HB 1651 (Del. Price): Makes the rental application process more transparent.

Pass SB 1340 (Sen. Barker): Makes the rental application process more transparent.

Pass HB 1702 (Del. Maldonado): Requires landlords to inform tenants of rent increases 90 days before their rental contract renews.

Pass HB 1732 (Del. Bennett-Parker): Offers tenants a payment plan before eviction if they owe less than one month's rent.

These bills would require landlords to be transparent about their policies, whether that be credit score requirements, or increases in rent. This ensures that tenants have sufficient information and time to prepare for a change in circumstances.

Pass HB 1650 (Del. Price): Allows localities to enforce rental agreements when landlords don't keep property up to code.

Pass HB 1845 (Del. Taylor): Requires landlords to refer elderly or disabled tenants to social services if they are evicted.

Pass SB 1278 (Sen. Boysko): Allows localities to create rent stabilization ordinances

Counties and cities throughout Virginia are most intimately familiar with their community's housing needs and the unique challenges in their area. These bills allow for localities to protect their residents in a more concrete way.

Pass HB 1635 (Del. Bulova): Allows tenants to terminate a lease if the dwelling place is uninhabitable due to landlord negligence.

Pass HB 1735 (Del. VanValkenburg): Clarifies policy around the statement of tenant rights and responsibilities.

These bills support tenants by informing them of their rights and allowing them to avoid paying rent for an uninhabitable home.

Sources include Virginia Poverty Law Center and Virginia Housing Alliance

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Support paid sick days for Virginia workers

SB886- Surovell

HB2087- Mundon King

HB1988- Guzman

Problem: Approximately 41 percent of private sector workers, **1.2 million workers in Virginia, have no paid sick days** or any paid time off (PTO). This creates a crisis for workers in low-wage positions who must choose between taking a sick day for themselves or their children and getting paid. Workers who go to work sick endanger their co-workers, the public and the ability of the business to remain open. Workers who send their children to school sick endanger other children and teachers.

Policy solution: In 2021, the General Assembly passed a bill to provide paid sick days to 30,000 home healthcare workers. In 2023, VICPP seeks to expand coverage to additional workers. There are bills in the House and Senate that intend to expand coverage to workers (SB886-Surovell, HB2087- Mundon King, HB1988- Guzman) and increase protections for workers in relation to the use of paid sick leave (HB1988- Guzman). VICPP supports these bills. The bills allow workers to earn up to five paid sick days (40 hrs) each year. PTO policies that allow workers to take time to care for themselves or sick family members meet the bill requirements.

Who benefits: Almost everyone benefits from a paid sick day standard, which is why 83 percent of Virginia registered voters support a paid sick day standard. Strong majorities of Democrats (96 percent), Independents (78 percent) and Republicans (72 percent) support a paid sick day standard. Paid sick days help:

Businesses - Employers lose \$160 billion annually in productivity due to "presenteeism" - coming to work despite illness or injury. Providing paid sick days results in reduced turnover – saving businesses money. The

restaurant industry which has a high turnover rate, found that implementing workplace benefits can reduce turnover by 50 percent.

Workers and their families - When a worker takes 3.5 unpaid sick days, the average family loses a month's worth of groceries. Workers must choose between feeding their families and caring for themselves or their children.

Schools - Parents who don't have paid sick days are more than twice as likely to send their children to school sick than parents who have paid sick days. Sick children can't learn and spread germs to children and teachers.

Public health – Workers in certain industries (food-service, personal healthcare, and childcare workers) are the least likely to have paid sick days. More than half of all Norovirus outbreaks can be traced back to sick food service workers who were forced to choose between working sick and losing pay or their job. An October 2020 report in *Health Affairs* showed that the paid sick leave provision of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) reduced the spread of coronavirus. Researchers called paid sick days "a highly effective tool to flatten the curve."

People of color – In the US, about 38 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Latinos do not have access to a single paid sick day.

Other states: Sixteen states have already passed paid sick day standards. Many of them rank higher than Virginia in overall health.

Sources: Family Values @ Work, National Partnership for Women & Families, United Health Foundation, U.S Bureau of Labor & Statistics, YouGov American poll

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HB 2283



virginia interfaith
power & light

www.vaipl.org

PROTECTING VIRGINIANS FROM UTILITY SHUT-OFFS

Contact: Leah Jones
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Support

Sponsor Del. Shin (D-86)

The Problem

Virginia currently has among the weakest utility disconnection protections for customers of any state in the south and southeast.

North Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama each offer more protection for low-income customers by prohibiting utility disconnection during certain months, during extreme weather or within specified temperature ranges.

Unlike VA, these states also offer payment plans to help financially-strapped customers while they retain access to their essential services.

Policy Solution

Virginia should protect utility customers (gas, electric and water) by:

1. Per SCC recommendations, establishing a disconnection policy for any declared public health emergency, and formalizing disconnection policies during very hot or cold weather conditions (i.e., when forecasted temperatures are at or above 95°F or at or below 32°F).

2. Suspending service disconnections for non-payment during non-business days.

3. Encouraging utilities to provide customers with arrears and subject to shut-off an opportunity to enroll in a repayment plan.

4. Requiring utilities to annually report on the frequency and reasons for shut-offs due to unpaid bills.

Who Benefits

Low-income Families & Communities of Color

Many of our neighbors most impacted by states of emergency and the increasingly worsening effects of climate change like extreme weather are from communities of color and low-income families. It is important to ensure resilience for families financially burdened by utility bills in times of crisis.

Vulnerable Populations

Providing additional support for community members like the elderly, children, and those who have medical conditions and/or disabilities is urgently needed.

Expanding utility disconnection protections for our neighbors at higher risk of being affected by extreme weather events helps to limit disconnections and ensure access to those who need gas, electric, and water services the most.

Virginia Interfaith Power & Light collaborates, as people of faith, to grow healthy communities and advance climate justice through education, advocacy, and worship.