



**NEW VIRGINIA MAJORITY**

# **2023 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA**



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# INTRODUCTION

## Our History

In 2006, pro-immigrant marches mobilized millions of immigrants across the nation, and in Virginia it was clear that there was a need to empower people to organize and mobilize communities into action. In response to the failure of Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform in 2007, the Board of Directors of Tenants and Workers United founded New Virginia Majority (NVM) to increase civic engagement among new Americans and people of color. Since our founding, NVM has built progressive power through community organizing and leadership development, civic engagement, policy advocacy, and strategic communications with a goal of creating a Virginia that works for all of us, not just a few. As we celebrate 15 years of building progressive power in the state, we are proud of the many milestones and victories we have achieved along the way. We invite you to remember those key moments in our organizational history on page 9.

## The Work Ahead

While centering the leadership and demands of working class women of color, we have made significant strides to create a Virginia and a new politic that is rooted in the needs and struggles of the Latinx, Black, Asian American Pacific Islander, and youth communities that we organize with all year, not just during the election season. No matter the political party in power or the outcome of an election, our priorities do not change. We remain steadfast in our commitment to build the people power needed to create more equitable political systems that truly work for all of us and advancing policies that address the legacy and ongoing impact of racial and economic injustice in the Commonwealth.

This General Assembly session, we are ready to resist regressive legislative action that threatens the progress we have made to improve the lives of Virginia families. We call on our allies and legislative champions to help us protect and defend against detrimental rollbacks, including funding cuts to public education, policies that make it less safe for LGBTQ+ youth and immigrant communities, efforts to reverse criminal justice reforms and essential reproductive health statutes, measures to curtail tenant protections, attempts to weaken environmental regulations, and restrictions on Virginians' voting rights.

Enclosed, you will find our 2023 legislative agenda that outlines our legislative priorities, which are the next steps of our Ten Year Vision to create a Virginia that is welcoming to all who call it home.

In solidarity,

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Co-Executive Director

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# HOUSING JUSTICE

**Fund The Statewide Housing Voucher Pilot Program:** Include \$90.1M in funding for a statewide housing voucher pilot program in the state’s 2022-2024 biennium budget to provide housing vouchers for low-income Virginia tenants.

**Problem:** Virginia has a shortage of approximately 200,000 affordable rental units, and 347,000 households that need rental assistance but are not receiving it. Due to this shortage of affordable housing and rental assistance, nearly half of all Virginia renters are cost burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on housing. For extremely low-income individuals, this cost burden is even more severe, as approximately three-in-four of these households spend over 50% of their income on housing. Being cost burdened increases the likelihood of eviction, as one costly emergency can put a household behind on their rent. With rent relief no longer available for tenants, Virginia is currently facing a surge of evictions due to unaffordable housing.

**Solution:** Housing vouchers make housing affordable for extremely low-income renters. The federal Housing Choice Vouchers have been proven to prevent eviction, lift folks out of poverty, and reduce racial disparities in housing instability. However, only one-in-five voucher-eligible Virginia households are able to receive a housing voucher due to federal funding constraints. A statewide housing voucher program will help bridge the gap between federal funding and Virginia housing needs, and the 2022-2024 biennium budget, as introduced in 2022, required the Department of Housing and Community Development to develop guidelines to create a statewide housing voucher program. To put these guidelines into action, we are advocating for \$90.1M to create a pilot program to begin distributing housing vouchers to low-income families across Virginia.

**Related Budget Amendments:**

114 #9s, 114 #7s, 114 #27h, 114 #12h

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# HOUSING JUSTICE (CONT.)

**Allow Localities to Enact Rent Stabilization:** Allow localities the option to set maximum rent increases year-over-year to increase rent predictability for Virginia tenants.

**Problem:** Average rent prices in Virginia have increased by over 10% in the past year, and have raised even more drastically in certain localities. In Henrico, Chesterfield, Spotsylvania, Hampton, Virginia Beach, and Bedford County, rent has increased by approximately 20% on average since the start of the pandemic. While rent has dramatically increased during the pandemic, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, rent has spiked in certain localities. For example, from March 2019 to March 2020, average rent increased by over 10% for several Virginia localities, including Manassas Park, Chesapeake, Alexandria, Stafford, and Herndon. Severe increases in rent leads to unnecessary cost burden and strain on Virginia families, which forces some families to live in unsafe or overcrowded housing, and potentially face homelessness.

**Solution:** Approximately 200 localities across four different states and the District of Columbia have rent stabilization programs to protect their tenants from dramatic rent spikes. Allowing localities the option to set maximum rent increases year-over-year can lead to increased rent predictability and housing stability for Virginia tenants, thus mitigating displacement and eviction.

**Related Legislation:**

HB 1532 Rent stabilization, local; any locality may by ordinance adopt provisions. (Clark)  
SB 1278 Rent stabilization authority, local; civil penalty. (Boysko)

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# EDUCATION

**Fully Fund the Standards of Quality:** The Virginia Board of Education sent their recommendations to lawmakers for updating the Standards of Quality (SOQ) – minimum funding standards to provide K-12 students an adequate education.

**Problem:** State aid for public education is still down from 2009 levels. This means local school divisions are left paying more than what is required. High poverty divisions and divisions with the most students of color face the most difficulty making up these funds, resulting in vast inequities in educational opportunity across the state. Schools are struggling to provide adequate staffing, which results in insufficient counselors, social workers, instructional aides, and administrative and custodial staff. The pandemic has only widened these gaps, and students need full and fair school funding now more than ever before.

In the fall of 2021, the Virginia Board of Education issued a set of SOQ recommendations. These funding standards only outline the minimum resources the Board of Education says are necessary to meet the state’s constitutional duty to ensure a high-quality education for every Virginia student. Doing this would increase funding for school counselors, support for English learner students, and a host of other critical support positions in schools and programming.

**Solution:** All students, regardless of race, ethnicity, country of origin, or household income, have the right to a high-quality public education from Head Start to high school. Virginia’s underinvestment of our students, particularly along the lines of race and class, will have damaging implications for their future. It is now up to the General Assembly to adopt the SOQs and fully invest in these evidence-based approaches to improve student outcomes.

**Related Legislation:**

HB2111 Standards of Quality; work-based learning, teacher leaders and mentors, principal mentors. (Bourne)

SB1325 Standards of Quality; work-based learning, teacher leaders and mentors, principal mentors. (McClellan)

**Related Budget Amendments:**

137 #17h, 137 #13s, 137 #31h, 137 #5s, 137 #35h, 137 #7h, 137 #10h, 137 #9h, 136 #24s, 136 #46h, 136 #25s, 136 #30h, 136 #23h, 136 #42s, 137 #2s, 137 #15h

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# HEALTH

**Expand Health Coverage for Virginia’s Immigrant Children:** Every child should have every opportunity for a healthy start, including comprehensive health coverage.

**Problem:** In Virginia, there are stark inequities in access and enrollment in health coverage depending on a child’s immigration status. According to recent data, undocumented children have an estimated uninsured rate of 48% (13,000 children), more than ten times the uninsured rate of children who are citizens (4.1%). Ten states and the District of Columbia are addressing this disparity by currently using or developing plans to use state-only funds to cover income-eligible children in Medicaid/CHIP-like programs who are otherwise ineligible due to their immigration status.

**Solution:** Tens of thousands of children who are uninsured or underinsured and currently ineligible for Medicaid/CHIP would have new access to affordable and comprehensive coverage if Virginia expanded health insurance eligibility to immigrant children. Legislation previously carried by Delegate Tran and Senator McClellan would establish this type of health coverage program in Virginia. State lawmakers should take action on this issue during the 2023 legislative session to ensure tens of thousands of Virginia’s children do not have to spend yet another year without adequate health coverage and medical care. Addressing this issue offers an opportunity to reduce the disparities in children’s health coverage that exist along the lines of immigration status and prove that Virginia equitably invests in every child’s future.

## **Related Legislation:**

SB 1327 Comprehensive children's health care coverage program; DMAS shall establish. (McClellan)

HB 2210 Children; comprehensive health care coverage program. (Tran)

## **Related Budget Amendments:**

305#1h, 305 #1s

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# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

**Expand Virginia's Utility Customer Service Disconnection Protections:** Prohibit service disconnections during certain declared state and local emergencies and seasonal weather and temperature extremes.

**Problem:** Falling behind other states in the Southeast, Virginia lacks state policy outlining service disconnection protection, leaving disconnection terms to the utilities. This leaves utility customers more vulnerable during public health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as during seasonal weather and temperature extremes increasingly associated with the climate crisis. This was made evident from the emergency action required by the State Corporation Commission (SCC) and the General Assembly in 2020 when an unprecedented increase in utility debt required the state to issue temporary statewide moratoriums on utility service disconnections.

Service disconnection protections are most important for low-income households in the state who, on average, pay 7% or more of their income towards energy bills. These protections are also important for utility customers carrying outstanding utility debt that correlates with higher risk of service termination and predatory disconnection and reconnection fees. According to the most recent federal residential energy consumption survey, 25% (810,000) of 3.24 million households in the state are energy insecure. Energy insecure is categorized as households facing energy access challenges including but not limited to forgoing paying for food or medicine in order to pay an energy bill, keeping the home at an unsafe or unhealthy temperature, receiving a disconnection notice, and electricity or natural gas supply disruption due to nonpayment. In addition to the burden of energy costs that are more extreme for lower income households, on a national level, Latinx and Black utility customers are more likely to experience service disconnection relative to white utility customers, which emphasizes the racial disparity in energy insecurity.

**Solution:** Virginia should enact public health disconnection protections to protect utility customers from the health and economic impacts of service termination for up to 30-days after emergency declarations, codify temperature-based disconnection protections, and ease the ability of households to roll disconnection and reconnection fees into payment plans. Additionally, jurisdictional utilities should be required to report disconnections in their service areas to the SCC, which will allow the agency, stakeholders, and legislators to obtain annual data on service disconnections in order to make more just decisions related to utility regulation.

## **Related Legislation:**

HB 2283 Disconnection suspensions for certain utilities; state of emergency, residential customers, report. (Shin)

SB 1447 Disconnection suspensions for certain utilities; state of emergency, residential customers, report. (Edwards)

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# EXPANDING DEMOCRACY

**Approve the Right to Vote Amendment:** Amend Virginia’s Constitution to establish a constitutionally guaranteed right to vote for everyone who meets the qualifications of age, citizenship, and residency.

**Problem:** The right to vote, to choose our leaders and to weigh in on issues affecting our lives is at the heart of what it means to be an American, and yet there is no guaranteed right to vote in the US Constitution or the Virginia Constitution.

In 1902, during the Jim Crow era, Virginia’s constitution was amended to include, among other things, a poll tax, literacy test, special status to confederate soldiers and their families, and excluded those with criminal convictions. Currently, the criminal convictions ban, rooted in racism, continues to bar voting rights from people convicted of felonies. Without an affirmative right to vote in Virginia that cannot be abridged by law, the state governor has sole discretion to decide which Virginians that have felony convictions get to vote, which disenfranchises and erects barriers to some voters, but not others.

**Solution:** Voting is at the core of being American, and at the core of creating a just, democratic society. This legislative session, the General Assembly should approve a constitutional amendment to establish that the sole qualifications to vote in Virginia are U.S. citizenship, being at least 18 years of age, residency in Virginia, and registration to vote, therefore removing the prohibition for those previously convicted of a felony. Every person who meets these qualifications should have the fundamental right to vote in the Commonwealth.

An amendment guaranteeing a constitutional right to vote was approved previously in 2021 however, the exact amendment must be approved twice by the General Assembly. It must be approved again during the next two legislative sessions after failing to pass legislatively for a second time in 2022, and in order to be officially ratified in the Virginia Constitution it must also be approved by voters during the subsequent election.

## **Related Legislation:**

SJ 223 Constitutional amendment; qualifications of voters and the right to vote (first reference). (Locke)

HJ 520 Constitutional amendment; qualifications of voters and the right to vote (first reference). (Herring)

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# MILESTONES IN NVM'S HISTORY

## 15 Years of Building Progressive Power

Over the past 15 years, New Virginia Majority has built progressive power in order to transform Virginia into a state that works for all of us, not just a few. We will continue to advance a movement that energizes and empowers working class communities of color, women, youth, the LGBTQ+ community, and progressive voters.



The failure of comprehensive federal immigration reform leads Tenant and Workers United (TWU) to create New Virginia Majority (NVM) to build progressive power at the state level, through increased civic engagement and community organizing.

# 2007



In the lead up to the 2008 presidential election, NVM launches one of Virginia's first voter engagement programs that focuses exclusively on expanding the electorate of working class people of color and registers over 200,000 Virginia voters and knocks on over 1 million doors by 2015.

# 2008



After nearly decade of organizing to end voter disenfranchisement, Virginia makes history, restoring rights to hundreds of thousands of formerly incarcerated people; NVM actively registers 29,000 of these Virginians to vote the same year.

# 2016



After years of organizing, and under a Democratic trifecta, NVM advances legislation granting undocumented residents access to driving privileges.

# 2020



NVM helps spearhead passage of the historic Virginia Voting Rights Act explicitly prohibiting voter discrimination or intimidation on the grounds of race.

# 2021

