



# Faithful Engagement The 2014 General Assembly Report

April 2014

## About the Virginia Interfaith Center

*The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy is Virginia's oldest faith-based advocacy group. We are a nonpartisan coalition of faith communities working to create progressive public policy by engaging people of faith, educating the public about social issues, the legislative process, and the call to advocacy. Our work is supported through the generosity of individuals, congregations, religious groups and philanthropic foundations.*

## Introduction

The regular 60-day session of this year's Virginia General Assembly ended on March 8th without passage of a budget due to the continued debate about Medicaid expansion. Governor McAuliffe reconvened legislators for a special session beginning March 24th. There was a significant number of freshman Delegates elected and special elections to fill open seats. Republicans maintained control of the House and in the Senate an equal split (20/20) remains, but because the deciding vote can be cast by Lt. Governor Northam in the event of a tie, this has benefited Democrats. Legislators introduced 2,888 bills, hundreds of which passed out of the legislature and have been signed or vetoed by Governor McAuliffe. In addition to making thousands of required policy decisions, our elected officials were tasked with passing Virginia's biennial budget. This year, the most significant part of the budget debate was the issue of expanding Medicaid to 400,000 low-income, uninsured Virginians under the provisions of the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

Passionate advocates, with the help of Virginia Interfaith Center (the Center), navigated the General Assembly to voice their positions on our key policy and budget priorities. We issued 21 Action Alerts and sent out over 49,256 e-mails to constituents, segmented by legislative district and micro-targeted according to legislative committee membership for maximum impact. Nearly 9,092 advocates responded to the calls, resulting in over 1,900 contacts with legislators in the form of phone calls, emails, letters and personal visits. Additionally, 170 advocates attended the Center's Day for All People, while hundreds of others attended denominational advocacy days including United Methodist Day, Episcopal Day, Presbyterian Day, and Jewish Advocacy Day.

## REDUCING POVERTY Earned Income Tax Credit

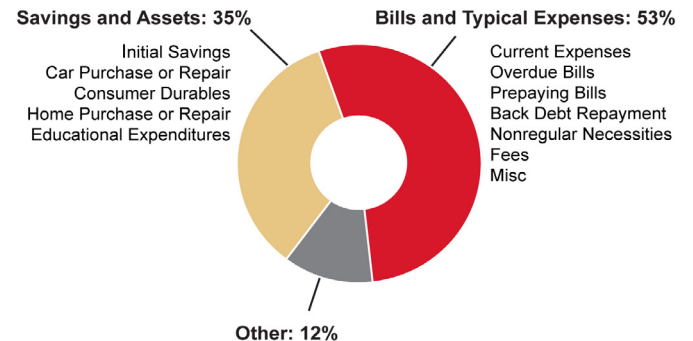
The Virginia Earned Income Credit (EIC) helps hard-working, low-income individuals and families offset their income taxes. Offered by individual states and the federal government (EITC), the credit is based on earnings and family size. By putting money back into the pockets of hard working Virginians, the credit encourages work, lifts up low-income communities, and infuses money back into the state's economy. The lowest-income earners in Virginia disproportionately pay more of their income in taxes than the top 1 percent of earners.

Without state action this year, Virginia's tax credit was set to expire. Together with the Full Credit Coalition, the Center advocated for renewing the program and its full funding, and for the first year campaigned to make the credit refundable. Legislation introduced by Del. Ware (Powhatan), HB 1085, to reauthorize the tax credit through 2017 was quickly passed by both chambers and has been signed in to law by the Governor. The refundable

## Boosting Economic Security

Research shows that families receiving federal EITC refunds use those dollars to help make ends meet.

Use of Total EITC Refund Dollars by Category



Source: The Commonwealth Institute's analysis of "The Role of Earned Income Tax Credits in the Budgets of Low-Income Families," The National Poverty Center Working Paper Series, #10-05, June

credit effort was the main priority of the coalition. Del. Plum (Reston) introduced HB 1151 to initially refund the full credit, but later as a compromise proposed a 20 percent refund. However, the bill was defeated by the House Finance Subcommittee. In the Senate, another strategy was employed by Sen. McEachin (Henrico) with a budget amendment, but it was not included in the proposed Senate budget due to fiscal impact. Overall, it was a successful first campaign year and provided ample opportunity to talk with legislators about the importance of helping low-income families lift themselves out of poverty.

### TANF Eligibility

This session, numerous bills were introduced to both limit access to and expand eligibility for TANF benefits. TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) is a large block grant distributed to states by the federal government, to which the state also contributes. It supports families transitioning to employment by providing assistance for things like child care, job training, and some cash assistance.

For the first time, legislation to adjust TANF benefits to the Consumer Price Index to compensate for inflation was introduced. Despite increases in poverty in Virginia, there has been only one increase in benefit levels since the early 2000s and no adjustment for inflation. Of two bills introduced by Sen. Favola, SB 132, and Del. Kory (Falls Church), HB 38, the Senate bill advanced farther. SB 132 successfully passed the Senate and was included in the proposed budget. However upon crossover the bill was defeated by the House Health, Welfare and Institutions Committee where HB 38 was previously defeated.

Del. Orrock (Thornburg) introduced HB 1068 that would have extended TANF benefits to individuals reentering their communities after serving time for drug possession felonies, the only category of crimes for which one is ineligible for TANF. These benefits are a particularly critical resource for mothers looking to find employment and provide for their families after returning home. The bill was heard before the House Health, Welfare and Institutions subcommittee, was sent to the House Appropriations Committee and defeated.

Del. Lingamfelter (Prince William) and Sen. Colgan (Manassas) introduced budget language to use federal TANF funds to provide underprivileged children in families already receiving TANF benefits a back to school supply allowance. However, the amendments were not included in the final budget due to overall fiscal concerns.

Finally, there were yet again a number of bills introduced that would have made recipients of VIEW (Virginia Initiative for Employment not Welfare) subject to drug tests before receiving benefits. Concerns about the constitutionality and fiscal impacts of implementing such policies ultimately led to the successful defeat of these bills.

### Predatory Lending

In recent years, payday and car title lenders have found a new way to bait consumers into paying high interest rates through open-end credit loans. A loophole in the Payday Lending Act allows these lenders to operate without regulation and there are no limits on the interest they can charge. Open-end lenders are not regulated by the Bureau of Financial Institutions, making it difficult to know how widespread this problem truly is. Del. Yancey (Newport News) introduced HB 1004 to close the open end loophole and require these lenders to instead obtain car title or payday lending licenses and operate by those rules. This bill was defeated by the House Commerce and Labor Committee.

### ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

#### Medicaid Expansion Education and Advocacy

As faithful advocates, we believe that ensuring access to affordable and quality healthcare is a shared responsibility that is grounded in our common humanity. A stalemate over closing the coverage gap dominated the General Assembly this year. In an evenly split chamber, Senate members proposed a plan for expansion that uses the federal Medicaid funding to buy private insurance under "Marketplace Virginia". Members of the House who oppose expansion point to the fiscal woes at the federal government saying that the federal government cannot afford its current obligations, much less new ones and



**The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy works on federal legislation to address poverty through the Half-in-Ten Campaign. The Half-in-Ten campaign is an effort to cut poverty in half in 10 years working through policy channels at both the state and federal level. The Center is the Virginia partner of this national anti-poverty effort. You can find out more and sign the Half-in-Ten pledge at [www.halfinten.org](http://www.halfinten.org).**





they fear Virginia will be left to cover the cost. We believe the federal government is able to meet its obligations as it does in all other areas of spending. There has never been a reduction to the medicaid match rates since the programs inception 50 years ago.

Virginia Consumer Voices for Healthcare worked closely with partner organizations and visited with approximately 25 members of the General Assembly and their staff to discuss their position on coverage options and provided information to legislators as needed. We participated in several advocacy days and helped community-based advocates bring their message to legislators. Together with Center staff, the VCV team also helped a small group of Virginia veterans that fall in the coverage gap to drop off materials to House and Senate members and provided health care related information at two faith-based advocacy days.

In addition, through a series of 12 email action alerts sent during the General Assembly session we afforded advocates with opportunities to contact legislators about the importance of health care access for all. Nearly 300 individuals responded by sending emails to their legislators. VCV and the Center also partnered with other groups to host a rally for health care and launched Moral Mondays during the special legislative session to keep the focus on the need for closing the gap.


### ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The Center planned to focus our environmental policy work on maintaining current moratorium on uranium mining. During the 2013 General Assembly, the bills introduced to lift the ban on uranium mining in Virginia were both withdrawn. This year, no bills were introduced to lift the ban. Sen. Frank Ruff (Mecklenburg) proposed a bill to regulate exploratory drilling in Virginia but that bill was ultimately postponed. More recently, Virginia Uranium, the Canadian company that holds the Pittsylvania County leases has pulled back from actively lobbying to lift the ban. Virginia Uranium's President has written in several newspapers about his view that mining would benefit the economy. We believe the price of uranium and the long-term impact of mining on the environment do not bear out. The risk to the environment, the water and health of Virginians is too great and no economic benefit in the near term can offset

that amount responsibly. We will continue to monitor developments regarding uranium mining and work to educate the public about the potential risks.

The Center followed up this year on legislation to make it more economically viable to install solar panels. This year we helped coalition partners to weigh in on legislation that would offer an exemption from local machinery and tools taxes on solar equipment. Last year we worked to pass legislation about Power Purchase Agreements (PPA's) under which the customer pays only for the power produced by the system. Customers that pay no taxes, including non-profit entities like churches and charitable organizations can't use the 30% federal tax credit to reduce the cost of the system if they purchase it directly. Under a PPA, the system owner can take the tax credit and pass along the savings in the form of a lower power price.

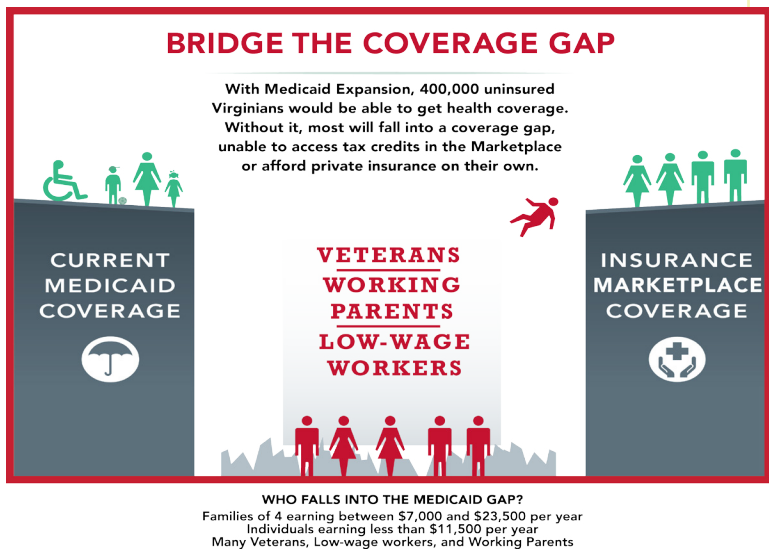
Sen. Hanger (Mount Solon) introduced SB 418 and Del. Hugo (Fairfax) introduced HB 1239 and both passed and thus eliminate real (land) and personal property taxes on solar equipment for businesses.



**As Virginia implements the Affordable Care Act, we continue to have a voice in the debate through Virginia Consumer Voices for Healthcare. VCV works to incorporate the consumer perspective in policy debates as the Commonwealth moves forward with implementation.**

**BRIDGE THE COVERAGE GAP**

With Medicaid Expansion, 400,000 uninsured Virginians would be able to get health coverage. Without it, most will fall into a coverage gap, unable to access tax credits in the Marketplace or afford private insurance on their own.



**WHO FALLS INTO THE MEDICAID GAP?**  
 Families of 4 earning between \$7,000 and \$23,500 per year  
 Individuals earning less than \$11,500 per year  
 Many Veterans, Low-wage workers, and Working Parents



## STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

### In-State Tuition

In 2013 and again this year, the Center supported legislation to offer in-state tuition to Virginia students that are approved through the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Separate bills were introduced in the House Del. Lopez (Arlington/Fairfax) and Del. Kory (Falls Church) and Del. Rust (Loudoun). Del. Rust's bill, HB 747 moved forward through the committee process in the House where it passed both the Higher Education subcommittee and the full Education Committee. In the end, the bill was defeated in the Appropriations Committee where the chair of the Higher Education subcommittee announced that he would not bring it up for a vote. A similar bill, SB 249 introduced by both Sen. McEachin (Henrico) and Sen. Ebbin (Alexandria) failed to pass on the Senate floor.

All of the public four-year institutions, including the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, James Madison, George Mason University and the University Mary Washington endorsed the legislation and we will continue to monitor opportunities to offer this important benefit that could do so much for students and for the future of Virginia.

### Gun Violence

Virginia's concerns about gun violence are equally rooted in the experiences of mass shootings at Virginia Tech and in Newtown, Connecticut as well as the all too frequent gun deaths in our communities that leave families and neighborhoods shattered. There was a lot of proposed legislation regarding firearms during the General Assembly including bills to regulate guns in schools, regulate types of weapons and magazines, background checks and other restrictions on who can own and possess what firearms, when and where. The Center focused our efforts on supporting background checks and limiting access to guns by persons previously convicted of violence or stalking.

There were several variations on bills to address the need for more background checks to close the private sale/gun show loophole. For example, Sen. McEachin (Henrico) introduced SB 520 to prohibit the sale or transfer of any firearm without going through a licensed dealer, thereby necessitating a background check and closing the private sale loophole. Sen. Deeds (Bath) introduced SB 287 to require a criminal history check in order to transfer firearms. Both were defeated in Senate Courts of Justice Committee.

Some important pieces of legislation made it through their respective houses and were signed into law by the Governor including Brendan's Law, to regulate celebratory gunfire and a bill to tighten up the background check system by including information about persons who are subject to involuntary commitment for a mental health concern. Brendan's Law was introduced by Sen. Marsh (Richmond) SB 65 and Del. Carr (Richmond) HB 810 to penalize any person who recklessly handles any firearm with disregard for human life and causes serious bodily injury of another person resulting in permanent and significant physical impairment is guilty of Class 6 felony. Sen. McEachin's (Henrico) SB 576 and Del. McClellan's (Richmond) HB 743 will require district court judge to file any order from a commitment hearing for involuntary admission, involuntary outpatient treatment, or certification of voluntary admission subsequent to a temporary detention order. This will help keep databases of prohibited persons up to date and more effective when deciding who should be allowed to purchase firearms.

### Death Penalty

Historically, the Center has opposed the death penalty. This is consistent with the views of most, if not all of our faith traditions. While it is not a self-standing policy priority for the year, we remain committed to working with our closest faith partners to oppose the death penalty when afforded the opportunity to weigh in. Del. Miller (Manassas) introduced HB 1052 and Sen. Carrico (Galax) SB607 which would allow electrocution as the default means of execution if lethal injection isn't available. Both bills were continued to 2015. The Center was supportive of HB 942 by Del. Surovell (Mt. Vernon) that would remove electrocution as manner of execution for prisoners, thus requiring lethal injection, but the bill was defeated in the House Militia, Police and Public Safety Committee.

### Human Trafficking

Human Trafficking, also known as modern day slavery, is the illegal trade of people for profit and is the second largest criminal industry in the world. According to Richmond Justice Initiative, it is estimated that within the United States there are 250,000 American children who become victims of this demeaning crime each year. This past General Assembly session we worked closely with the Coalition on Human Trafficking. Of the various bills introduced to the legislature, four successfully passed through both chambers and have been signed by





the Governor. Two of these bills relate directly to law enforcement. Sen. Obenshain (Harrisonburg) introduced SB 654 which will provide training to help police officers to identify the signs of trafficking. Del. Hugo (Fairfax) introduced HB 485 to authorize law enforcement to seek subpoenas for electronic communication devices in trafficking cases, leading to the potential rescue of other trafficked victims.

In the area of prevention, Del. Hugo (Fairfax) introduced HB 660 to require all assets gained as a result of trafficking

## Membership

Membership in the Virginia Interfaith Center is more than an act of charity; it is a commitment to real social change and justice. Our members are the true heart of the Center and play important roles in determining our policy priorities, engaging in advocacy, and telling others about our work.

As of June 2013, the Center had more than 500 individuals providing financial support through their membership in the Center, an increase of more than 17% over the prior 18-month period. Financial support from our members has increased by nearly 25% since 2010. It is vital that we continue this growth to ensure our ongoing effectiveness as a moral voice for social change.

Your membership gift helps to pay for free educational programs and advocacy trainings throughout Virginia, as well as provide important tools to inform legislators and the public. Your gift matters! Every dollar from your donation helps us to leverage additional resources from foundations and organizations that strengthen our ongoing efforts and help develop new, strategic opportunities.

another individual to be confiscated from the trafficker. This is a huge success as the trafficking industry profits approximately \$35 billion a year or \$500,000 per person trafficked. All assets acquired will be confiscated by the state. Additionally, companion bills introduced by Sen. Obenshain (Harrisonburg) SB 454 and Del. Rob Bell (Greene) HB 235, will add human trafficking to the list of crimes recognized as a criminal offense. Prior to this year's General Assembly session, 28 states recognized this criminal act as a punishable crime; Virginia is the 29th state to make this offense punishable by jail time.

### How it works

- Make at least a \$50 contribution to the Virginia Interfaith Center. Gifts above \$50 are encouraged and are essential for us to meet our financial goals.
- Make the gift anytime during the year. Your membership is good for one year, with major renewal efforts coming in the Spring and Fall each year.
- Participate in our Annual Priority Survey of members.
- Let your voice be heard on what issues are most important to you!
- Attend Center programs, and tell others about our work. You are our best advocate for others to learn about our the Center!
- Get involved in a regional chapter, or work with others in your area to start a new one!
- Attend our Annual Meeting, held each December, at no cost.

Become a member today, or renew your support for 2014, by making your gift online at:

**[www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org](http://www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org)**

You may also become a member by mailing a check, made out to  
Virginia Interfaith Center PO Box 12516 Richmond, VA 23241

The Center is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization and your donation is tax deductible to the extent allowed by the law.



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