

**Learn. Pray. Act.**

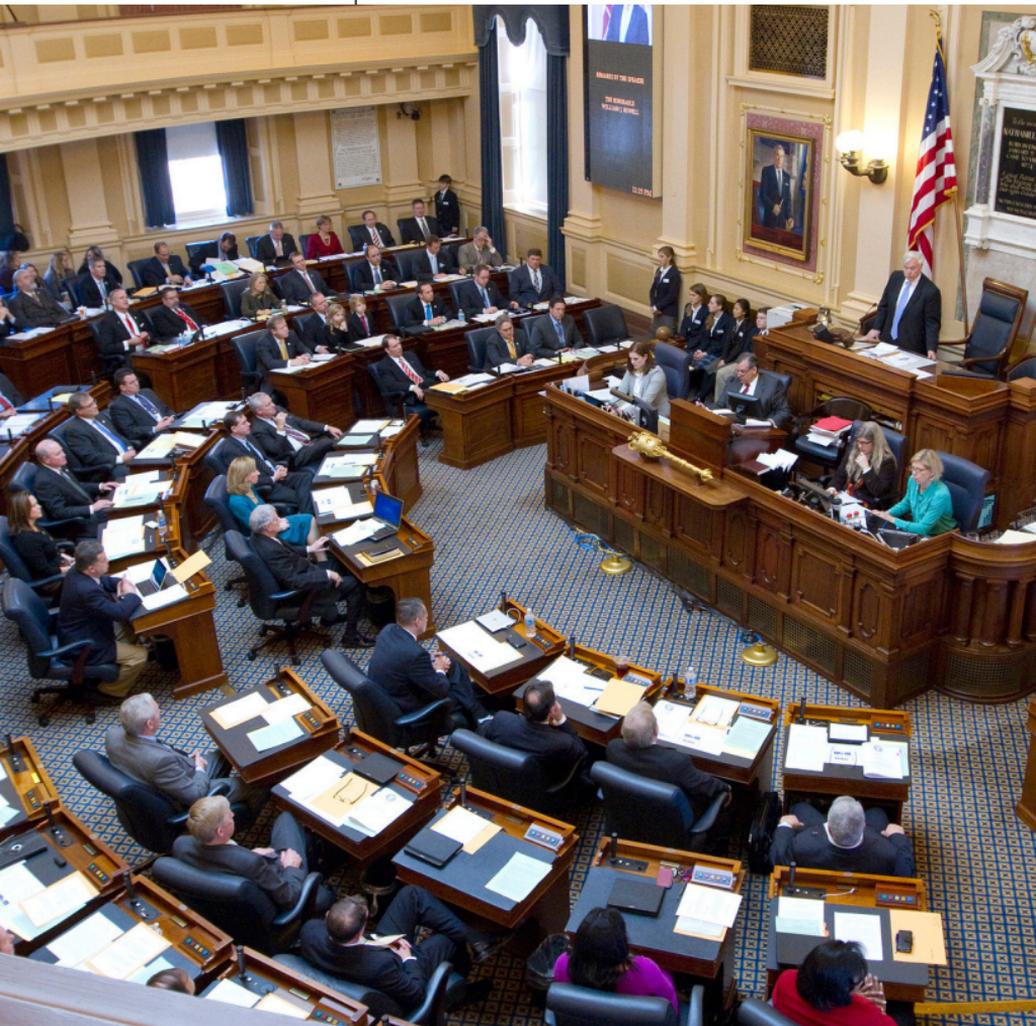
**2016 PRIORITY BRIEF**





## **Our Vision:**

A world where people of all faiths cooperate to create compassionate communities that are just, peaceful, equitable and sustainable.



## **Our Mission:**

To empower Virginians to create social justice for all by advocating for systemic change.

## **Our Work:**

We unite people of faith in Virginia through partnerships with other statewide advocacy organizations and our own grassroots networks.

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for the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy

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## The Interim Executive Director’s letter

Recently while I was out for lunch, I decided to walk over to the “Slave Trail” that is near our office in the Shockoe Bottom section of Richmond. I sat on a pleasant fall afternoon in the calm of the area marked for “Lumpkin’s Jail.” Because the Virginia



Interfaith Center is sensing a growing movement of concern and energy to focus on racism, I thought I would sit and reflect on what is the environs that inform those of us who come and go from work near to where hundreds of thousands of Africans were brought to this country

and became part of our history and our economy as human slaves from 1778-1865. The place, called Lumpkin’s Jail, became nicknamed “Devil’s Half Acre.” Later, after the war was over and Lumpkin died, his black wife, Mary, gave the property to a Baptist minister, who made the jail into a classroom for emancipated slaves. Then, in time this property became part of Virginia Union University and the name changed to “God’s Half Acre.”

As we look at our challenges confronting the Commonwealth of Virginia and the nation, no less a transformation must occur! On June 17, 2015, one of the most horrific acts of recent racial violence occurred in Charleston, S.C., at Mother Emmanuel AME Zion Church. While nine human beings died in the sanctuary of hospitality intended to transform and invigorate our world to be a better and more compassionate common home, violence made its mark and left its nasty and vile scar once again.

But, as I travel around the Commonwealth, I sense that many want to change. Many do not want to do the same daily business as usual, turning a deaf ear to the cries of people suffering economic, criminal or social injustices that are particularly focused on the poor, African American, and now, upon immigrants. The priorities that are outlined in the following pages individually are parts of the hurt and pain that impacts many people. But we need to look at these issues, not separately, but together through the lens of racism to see how this dehumanizing force tears apart all of us, breaking down the tapestry of our human community, when we are reticent to act as one human family under God.

I ask you today to learn about the individual injustices that need to be rectified. However, I ask you to look at all of these subjects through the filter of racism that separates, judges, condemns and executes individual, families, communities and the nation to a bondage that should have been broken years ago. Yet, we all still suffer from the haunting words that Cain replied to God after he had killed his brother, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The question posed then, is what we must face today, if there is to be a God's Half Acre in our time.

**Learn. Pray. Act.**

*The Rev. Charles Swadley is serving as the interim Exective Director of the Center.*

## 2016 POLICY PRIORITIES

The following policy areas are drawn from listening to our members and with the approval of our Board of Directors. Over the course of the year ahead, we will focus on access to health care, issues of criminal and economic justice, immigration, and gun violence prevention. As well we will continue our ongoing efforts in environmental justice, fair redistricting, and easing voting restrictions. The Center will work to remain flexible in response to legislative opportunities and threats as they arise.

### ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

VICPP and **Virginia Consumer Voices for Healthcare**, the Center's healthcare program, continues to focus on ensuring that all Virginians have **access to high-quality, affordable health care**. When lower- and moderate-income people gain health coverage, the burden of paying health-care bills is eased and they are able to focus on other pocketbook issues. In addition, the **burden of paying for non-insured Virginians** is eased on health care providers and those with insurance whose coverage helps subsidize the uninsured.

### EXPANDING COVERAGE

In Virginia, **approximately 400,000 Virginians would benefit from using available federal Medicaid dollars to provide access to care**. These individuals are in the **"coverage gap,"** because they do not earn enough to purchase health insurance in the Healthcare Marketplace, and they currently do not qualify for Medicaid in Virginia. The majority of these individuals are working, but have jobs where **health insurance is not a benefit**.

Further, they do not earn enough to purchase health insurance through the insurance marketplace. Right now, Virginia's Medicaid program does



not extend to childless adults between the ages of 19 and 65. Federal funds will pay for 100% of the cost of coverage through 2017, and over the next few years until 2020 when the federal match drops to 90% and will **free up millions of dollars annually for other state budget needs. Closing the coverage gap will help safety net providers, including hospitals, stay in business.**

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE

VICPP strongly supports efforts to bring **fairness to the judicial system in Virginia**. People of color and minorities throughout their lives are disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system in **mandatory minimum sentencing**, keeping people incarcerated longer and often with fewer resources dedicated toward returning them to their communities.

African Americans comprise roughly 20 percent of the adult population, but in the justice system they comprise **47 percent of all arrests and 61 percent of state prison inmates**. For every white person incarcerated in Virginia, six African Americans are behind bars. As a result, 20 percent of African American Virginians have lost the right to vote, isolating them from their communities and civic participation.

In Virginia, people who are arrested may be released on their own recognizance or the judge may require them to **put up bail money**. Those who can't afford to pay their bail have the option of either staying in jail or using a bail agent, who will charge a nonrefundable fee—usually 10 percent of their bail—to post a bond



and bail them out. Opponents of this system argue that it effectively **punishes poor people who can't afford to get themselves out of jail** and puts them at risk for job and housing loss among other negative consequences.

Also, Virginia's legal threshold for felony robbery charges **has not changed since 1980, when it was raised from \$100 to the current level of \$200**. Virginia and New Jersey are the only states at this level, while the District of Columbia, Maryland and North Carolina have a threshold of \$1,000, Delaware has a threshold of \$1,500, and Pennsylvania has a threshold of \$2,000. Virginia's low threshold has been described as a "deterrent" by the retail industry. But, the reality is that the community suffers by having more young people enter the penal system under the extremely low threshold, which means that with a recidivism rate of 82%, most of those entering stay in the system for their life. The Center would like to see the **felony threshold raised to \$1,500**.

## ECONOMIC JUSTICE

We believe that economic inequality undergirds a multitude of injustices including **climate change to mass incarceration to exploitation of low-wage and undocumented workers**. Economic inequality also **disproportionately affects people of color**. We believe that a better Virginia is possible, and we support policies and programs that positively respond to the needs of lower-income individuals, families, and communities in Virginia. These include eliminating predatory lending, eliminating and preventing hunger in children, increasing the minimum wage to **\$15/hour**, and refunding the Virginia earned income tax credit to poor working families.

## RAISING THE MINIMUM WAGE



Many working families are falling behind. Our partner, The Commonwealth Institute, cites that **one in ten Virginia workers made less than \$8.29 in 2013**.

And low-wage workers in Virginia have endured stagnant wages even with our improving economy. Virginia's low-wage workers earn 17 cents for every \$1 high-wage Virginia workers bring home. That figure has decreased from 27 cents in 1979. Some policymakers believe that the minimum wage benefits only teenagers. Actually, close to 90% of minimum-wage earners are 20 or older, and about half have at least some college education. Most are working full-time (at least 35 hours/week). Close to **300,000 Virginia children have at least one parent who would benefit from increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour.**

## IMMIGRATION

Virginia has nearly **one million immigrants**. More than **275,000 of those are undocumented**. In the last year, we have seen a number of federal anti-immigrant bills introduced. In 2016, we anticipate far more federal anti-immigrant legislation.

We believe that federal immigration policy must include a **clear and timely path to citizenship** for those that would qualify, boosting the economy of Virginia and the U.S. We **cannot persist in a segregated society where some**



**have basic rights, while others are denied human rights.** As a practical matter in Virginia, we need to make sure that persons lawfully present in the United States are treated fairly. They must have **access to education**, and we must encourage them to **become citizens** with both the responsibility and the opportunity to vote. Many pay taxes, but are denied some of the benefits of their contributions. We need to make sure that residents with or without authorization have an opportunity to work in a safe environment, including driving privileges, and that they are not abused as a result of their undocumented status.

## ELIMINATING PREDATORY LENDING

VICPP has a robust history of **support for consumer finance protection**. We have consistently supported a **36% annual percentage rate (APR) cap** on interest rates for both **payday and car title lenders**. We also support other legislation designed to either cap fees or limit the number of loans offered by predatory lenders. At the federal level, we are strongly in support of the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau (CFPB) and its work to ensure that payday and predatory lenders are properly regulated.



Virginia passed positive payday loan reforms in 2008 in the Payday Lending Act. These protections have made payday loans somewhat less onerous, but payday loans have largely

been replaced by **triple-digit car-title loans** and largely unregulated **open-end loans that range from 250-360 percent**. These loans lock borrowers in a **vicious cycle of debt**.

According to Virginia's State Corporation Commission, in 2014, Virginia-based payday lenders have annually made more than 440,000 loans totaling more than \$170 million to more than 137,000 borrowers. The borrowers take out an average of more than three loans a year to stay afloat at an average annual interest rate of 289 percent. Virginia-based car title lenders also issued more than \$206 million in loans in 2013, up from \$180 million in 2012, to more than 150,000 borrowers, with an average APR of 216 percent. More than 17,000 borrowers had their car repossessed and more than 13,000 had their car sold.

VICPP supports efforts to **eliminate all forms of predatory lending and the development of affordable alternatives**.



## REDUCING CHILDHOOD HUNGER

Proper nutrition is vital to the healthy social, cognitive, and physical development in children. Kids who do not get enough healthy food to eat are more likely to struggle and are less likely to grow up to be successful and productive citizens. **More than 320,000 children in the state were at risk of hunger, or food insecure.** VICPP has joined the efforts of two partners whose work aims to eliminate hunger in children: the Virginia No Kid Hungry program and Virginia Hunger Solutions.

Launched in 2011 by the Virginia Poverty Law Center, the **Virginia No Kid Hungry** program brings together a public-private partnership that includes the Virginia Department of Health and the Virginia Department of Education and several corporate partners to work towards ending childhood hunger in the Commonwealth. The campaign is increasing awareness and participation in the Summer Meals program and the At-Risk After-school Meals program.

The Center supports the governor's inclusion of **funding for Universal Breakfasts in his latest budget proposal.**

## GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

We **must do more to address gun violence in the Commonwealth as it has taken the lives of too many innocents.** The Center supports legislation that will **require background checks for all firearm sales** and prohibit straw sales making it illegal to purchase a firearm on behalf of anyone not lawfully allowed to purchase it himself.

We support legislation to **further limit access to firearms for individuals who are previously convicted of violent crimes or have a recent history of mental illness.**



Virginia can do more to strengthen its gun laws. For example, in 2011, Virginia repealed its limitation on handgun purchases to one per person in any 30-day period, thus increasing the potential and reality of making more guns available more rapidly for potentially illegal or violent purposes.

**Virginia also imposes only a few restrictions on assault weapons.** Local governments in Virginia generally lack authority to regulate firearms or ammunition, and local courts must issue a concealed handgun permit to any applicant who meets basic qualifications.

At the present time, Virginia law does not require a background check prior to the transfer of a firearm between unlicensed individuals nor require firearms dealers to obtain a state license or to report lost or stolen firearms. Virginia does not require that a dealer who is receiving a firearm from a non-dealer to obtain a verification check from the Department of Corrections to determine if the firearm has been reported as lost or stolen. Also, **Virginia does not impose a waiting period to purchase a firearm.**

The Center supports improved regulation relative to those issues.

## ONGOING POLICY PRIORITIES

### ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

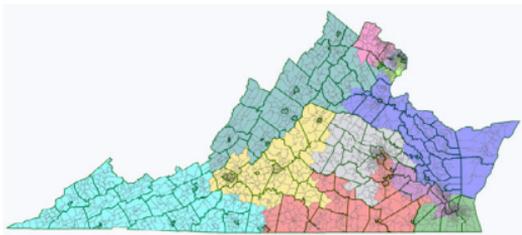
Environmental Justice is the **fair treatment** and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Communities of

color, which are often poor, are routinely **targeted for the placement of facilities that have negative environmental impacts**, such as landfills and industrial plants that pollute. VICPP will monitor proposed and current public policies that abuse the environment. These include **supporting efforts to reverse the effects of climate change and promoting clean water; opposing expansion of fracking on Virginia lands; prohibiting uranium mining; and minimizing the environmental impact of the proposed natural gas pipeline.**

## FAIR REDISTRICTING

Every 10 years, Virginia works through the process of redistricting for both state and federal districts. Historically the majority party works through a closed-door process to **draw district lines that give them a powerful advantage in future elections.** As

the demographics of Virginia have changed and New Americans are voting in increasing numbers, it is all



the more important that we adopt an **impartial and nonpartisan process** to draw the lines in the future. We will work through the General Assembly to call for a **fair and open** process to pave the way to redistricting in the future as other states have done successfully.

## REMOVING VOTING RESTRICTIONS

VICPP will also closely track related concerns such as the implementation of Virginia's **voter identification law** to ensure that people are not systematically disenfranchised from voting. Virginia should seek to expand its voter rolls, not contract them. This includes **restoring voting rights felons who have completed their sentences.**

## Membership and Support

The work of faith-based advocacy through the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy is **made possible through the support of individuals, congregations, faith communities and foundations**. The Center is blessed to have support from a **broadly diverse faith community** in Virginia, but we need **your help** to support our important mission.

If you would like to know more about membership or other opportunities for financial support of the work of the Center across the Commonwealth, please call **(804) 643-2474** or send an email to **office@virginiainterfaithcenter.org**. We will add you to our email list of more than 9,000 so that you can receive information about the work of the Virginia Interfaith Center, key issues, action alerts and important upcoming events.

We appreciate all gifts to support our advocacy. Visit **www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org/give** to make a **secure online donation**, or send your check to:

**Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy**  
**P.O. Box 12516**  
**Richmond, VA 23241**

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To learn more or request a speaker, contact us through the website or send an email to: **office@virginiainterfaithcenter.org**.

## Notes



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