



Learn. Pray. Act.

REPEAT

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE VIRGINIA INTERFAITH CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY
 Earthbound: 1716 East Franklin Street, Richmond, VA 23223
 Virtual: www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org

Board meets, gets to know Kim Bobo

The VICPP Board of Directors met on March 24 and spent time hearing from our new Executive Director, Kim Bobo, talking about our priorities for the upcoming year and the importance of fundraising in moving forward at the level of involvement that we want. The board also elected a new member, the Rev. Anthony Fludd. Bobo described the organization as in a transition phase, with new faces joining the staff including herself. She and the board applauded the work of the Rev. Charles Swadley as the interim director. While positive results were few for us during this latest legislative session (expansion of school breakfasts to combat childhood hunger did survive in the Commonwealth budget), there is movement on some of our priorities. She suggests that we focus on just two or three key issues in the future. As for the board, Bobo wants to see more involvement from members, including financially. One organizing goal would be to build a grassroots base in swing districts around the state. Ideally, there would be a VICPP volunteer "district coordinator" based in every senator and delegate's district. Gerrymandering has made our work more difficult. Discussion also focused on how the development of this district base might be integrated with the existing chapter structure. There was discussion of strengthening the relationship

Continued on page 2

A woman adds a candle to a street memorial in Brussels, Belgium, following the recent terrorist attacks.



A statement of solidarity in wake of the attacks in Brussels

The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy and the Virginia Council of Churches are calling on Virginia's elected leaders — and all citizens — to renew our commitment to religious freedom and pluralism and refrain from scapegoating our Muslim citizens and neighbors in the wake of another tragic action of violence.

Virginians are proud of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, drafted by Thomas Jefferson and passed into law by the Assembly in 1786. Virginia's leadership paved the way for the first amendment's freedom of religion in the Bill of Rights in 1789.

Today, we mourn with the people of Brussels and all those who have faced terrorist attacks. We know that politically motivated terrorists often use religious language to justify their actions. Many faith traditions have experienced their language usurped to justify political actions and decisions.

Our society is best-served by respectful civil discourse and discussion, not suicide bombers. Mosques and Muslim leaders throughout Virginia condemn the violence.

The heart of all religious traditions is love of God and love of neighbor. The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy united Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and others in Virginia to advocate justice in our Commonwealth's public policy. The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy was birthed out of the Virginia Council of Church's policy efforts in 1982, and we continue to share a close relationship. Together, we seek to close the health care coverage gap, reform our criminal justice system and reduce hunger and poverty in the state.

— *The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy and the Virginia Council of Churches*

Spring meeting

BOARD, continued from page 1:

between Board members and their local chapters.

In terms of staffing, Kim has asked Rev. Swadley to continue his outreach efforts as Faith Outreach Coordinator, She would like to increase Neill Caldwell in Communications and Virginia Consumer Voices's Cassandra Shaw to full-time, and increase the hours for administrative manager Ian Young. All of those plans depend on our fundraising success. There are also issues related to technology, database and networking, and the building that houses the VICPP office in Shockoe Bottom. In general, there is a need

to strengthen internal administrative systems, including donor recognition, staff time tracking, board meeting preparation and check management and processing. During a working lunch, Board members split into their committees to work on specific topics. The **Public Policy Committee** worked on developing a set of criteria for

the organization to choose in deciding which issues it should focus on. The staff has then been charged with doing research on a set of issues that the board members felt might meet the criteria. In the past, the organization has conducted a membership poll in order to gauge member interest on issues. Although this has provided an overall reading of interest, the process does not allow for members to evaluate such things as the possibilities for being effective and the overall organizational capacity on various issues. Over the next few months, both Kim and Charles will visit with chapters and affiliates to discuss issues and



A rare photo of Kim Bobo standing still, this time during our news conference at the General Assembly in late February.

criteria for focusing the agenda.

The **Organizing** Committee reported considerable work accomplished on strengthening VICPP's chapter structure, but there are significant differences among the chapters. Individuals in chapters are already doing work in developing relationships with their delegates and senators, through home office visits and by other means. So, chapters should play a role in our efforts to strengthen VICPP's organizing base. Also, many VICPP "members" have met with legislators and staff during the annual Day for All People, and they provide another starting point for expanding the VICPP organizing base. There needs to be a coordinated strategy involving VICPP staff, chapters and Board members in strengthening relationships with individual senators and delegates.

There was discussion of the relationship between Board members and their local chapters. In the past, the relationship has varied with the attitude of the individual Board member.

The **Finance and Fundraising** Committee said there is a need to raise additional income to address several changes that should be made in the budget primarily for staff and technology needs. A Fundraising Plan was provided to support the 2016 budget. The plan included raising money from Foundations (\$110,000); congregations (\$40,000); faith bodies, judicatories and religious organizations (\$50,000); other organizations (\$5000) and honoraria (\$3000). Major donors are expected to contribute \$60,000, with smaller donations and memberships totaling \$40,000. Other sources of income include events (\$15,000) and rent (\$15,000).

The **Board Development** committee introduced a new board member, the Rev. Scott Fludd, a United Methodist minister in Vienna, talked about board expectations and commitment, and nominated Rev. Fludd, who was elected to the board unanimously. Fludd serves Second Administrative Assistant of the Church of God in Christ in Newport News. He is also a member of the National Healthcare Ministries Association. Rev. Fludd is an experienced hospital and nursing home administrator. He earned a B.S. in Health and Hospital Administration from Ithaca College and a Master's in Healthcare Administration, from Long Island University, both in New York. Finally, the annual Board Retreat will be held June 26-27.



Rev. Fludd

Board for 2016:

Frank McKinney, Pres.

John Copenhaver, V.P.

Davis Balderston, Sec.

Julie Swanson, Tres.

Sarah Cochrane

Farhanahz Ellis

Ali Faruk

Anthony Fludd

Jenee' Gilchrist

Scott Hopkins

Warren Hottle

Debra Linick

Richard Samet

Alok Sirvastava

Irv Varkonyi

John Whitley



Rabbi Romer

Remembering Ben Romer

The Center lost a friend and supporter when Rabbi Ben Romer passed away on Feb. 28 when he suffered a massive heart attack. Romer worked with Jews and non-Jews throughout Richmond to create leadership committed to strengthen our community. A military chaplain of more than 22 years, he served the United States in Panama for Operation Just Cause, in Saudi Arabia and Iraq during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, and in Bosnia and Kosovo. Romer is survived by his wife of 43 years, Karen; daughter, Tamar Romer Beecher and her husband, Doug; son, Micah Romer; and daughter, Elisheva Romer Clinton and her husband, Mike. In the last week of his life Rabbi Romer wrote of the struggle every community faces in developing leadership. He cited Proverbs (29:18) and reminded readers: "Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, but the one who keeps Torah is overjoyed." Here are comments about the Rabbi from Board member **Debra Linick**: "Rabbi Romer was a wonderful spiritual leader for us when we were stationed far from home in

Germany. And he travelled to every corner of Europe, and deployed regions in the Middle East, to bring comfort and a minyan to remote communities. Back in Richmond, working with him from JCRC, he was always an important voice in interfaith dialogue. He will be missed and remembered fondly in so many corners of this earth. May your name always be for a blessing." And from Rev. **Charles Swadley**: "Ben was one of those very articulate, passionate, voices for justice and compassion in our community. We had come to love his outspoken courageous expression of what he believed to be right and just actions and policies for all human beings. Recently, I came to enjoy his daily expressions that he shared on Facebook. Ben, we salute your life, your love of neighbor, your friendship, your positive, life affirming witness, your dedicated citizenship, and your unwavering willingness to strive for a better world of interfaith relations. You did your very best to build up this world to be a better place, more reflective of God's love for all creatures and creation. Shalom, my friend."

Welcome Demetria Garden to VCV staff

Demetria Garden has worked as an advocate for those needing affordable healthcare coverage. She joins the Virginia Consumer Voices team after working as an In-Person Assister with Enroll Virginia. As an IPA, she conducted community outreach and enrolled persons into affordable healthcare coverage plans through the Affordable Care Act's Marketplace, and Medicaid. She relocated from New Jersey to Virginia three years ago; bringing with her non-profit experience in employee training, coaching, and social work. She's a graduate of Hofstra University in New York. Demetria understands trickle-down effect from a healthy individual to a healthy family to a healthy community to a healthy workforce. Ensuring that Virginians have access to affordable healthcare coverage is her goal at VCV.



Upcoming Events

- Islam: Knowledge Over Fear** – Sunday, April 3, 2 pm, Annandale
- Interfaith Voices Against Violence** – Friday, April 8, 6 pm, Christiansburg
- Ecumenical Advocacy Days** – Friday through Monday, April 15-18, Washington, D.C.
- Network Training for Immigration Advocacy** – Wednesday-Friday, April 20-22, Richmond Hill
- 8th Annual Virginia People's Assembly for Jobs, Peace & Justice** – Saturday, April 23, Wesley Memorial UMC, Richmond
- Healthcare discussion at Richmond NAACP meeting** – Tuesday, April 26, 7-9 pm, 700 N. 3rd St., Richmond
- "Joy of Wellness" Day** – Saturday, April 30, 9 am to 2 pm (vendor), Fifth Baptist Church, Richmond
- East End Festival** – Friday-Sunday, May 6-8 (vendor), Chimborazo Park
- Chesterfield Legislative Forum and Advocacy Training for Older Adults** – Tuesday, May 17, 11 am to 1 pm Le Prade Library, Chesterfield
- National Day of Prayer**, May 17

A recap of our our policy priorities fared

The 2016 General Assembly was a long (60-day) session, that adjourned sine die on March 12. The session was marked by policy differences between Gov. Terry McAuliffe's administration and the Republican majority in the House and Senate. These differences were most apparent in discussions on healthcare and judgeships. The biennial budget conference report was approved by both houses on March 11. This budget includes key funding for public schools and salary increases for teachers, university faculty and state employees. The Virginia Interfaith Center did see some success in policy priorities through additional funding for school breakfast programs, enhancements to the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the defeat of anti-immigrant legislation. However, many bills that would positively impact low income individuals in the Commonwealth were defeated.

Criminal Justice

Raising the Felony Threshold

VICPP worked with the Virginia Alliance Against Mass Incarceration to advocate for bills to raise the felony threshold for grand larceny. Virginia and New Jersey are the only states with a threshold of \$200, 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 legal threshold for felony robbery charges has not changed since 1980, when it was raised from \$100 to the current level of \$200, 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.

In the House, HB 396 (Del. Heretick) and HB 1167 (Del. Lindsay) which would have raised the felony threshold from \$200 to \$500 and \$1000 respectively, were laid on the table. SB 23 (Sen.

Reeves), a bill to raise the threshold to \$500 passed the Senate but was tabled in House Courts of Justice after crossover. While we do not condone stealing of any sort, charging an individual with a felony for a theft of an item worth \$200 has a disproportionate impact on those individuals who do not have the means for legal assistance in negotiating alternative punishment.

Juvenile Justice

Virginia is currently ranked as one of the worst states for referring youth in schools to the criminal justice system. VICPP worked with the RISE coalition, Reinvesting in Supportive Environments for Youth the the Educate Every Child coalition to support a bipartisan package of bills to reduce referrals from schools to law enforcement. HB 1132 (Del. LaRock), HB 1134 (Del. LaRock) and HB 1061 (Del. Bagby) failed to report out of the House. SB 458 (Sen. McEachin), a bill to decrease the number of school suspensions, passed in the Senate but was defeated on the floor of the House. The coalition was successful in passing, HB 487 (Del. McClellan), which will remove the requirement that School Resource Officers (SROs) "enforce school board rules and codes of student conduct," which is one way that students are increasingly referred to law enforcement.

Additionally, the biennium budget allows the Commonwealth to invest savings from the closings of expensive and totally outdated large Juvenile Justice facilities into community-based services and creates a workgroup for determining the future of juvenile justice facilities. Please consult the Commonwealth Institute's Half-Sheet for additional information on how the budget bill will have an impact on juvenile justice reform.

Virginia's juvenile justice system is broken. The use of large juvenile prisons do not make our communities safer or rehabilitate our youth shown by the 3 year reconviction rate of nearly 75%. Virginia has already reduced the juvenile correctional population from 600 to 350 and must now reinvest

savings in evidence based solutions.

Economic Justice

Raising the Minimum Wage

All bills in the House (HB 597, HB 623, HB 995 and HB 1258) and the Senate (SB 88, SB 129 and SB 668) that would have increased the minimum wage were either tabled or passed by indefinitely and therefore killed. Additionally, two bills to provide workers with paid sick days, HB 7 (Del. Simon) and SB 274 (Sen. Wexton), failed to move forward this year. Many working families are falling behind. The Commonwealth Institute, cites that one in ten Virginia workers made less than \$8.29 per hour in 2013. Furthermore, 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 when in reality close to 90% of minimum-wage earners are 20 or older and about half have at least some college education. Most minimum wage workers 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.

Earned Income Tax Credit

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) allows low income families to earn money back at tax time. The EITC is a targeted credit that qualifying Virginians can claim at tax time to reduce what they owe in state income tax. It can only be claimed for income earned through work, and the credit is structured to encourage people to work more hours. More hours worked equals more benefit to the economy. Congress made a series of improvements to the federal EITC in December to provide a larger tax credit for families with three or more kids and partially eliminate a reduction in the credit when people get married. These provisions are a part of the

state program but were set to expire in 2017. Senator Hanger and Delegate Ware worked with the McAuliffe administration to make these additional provisions permanent for Virginia's EITC program. It is estimated that 284,000 Virginia families stand to gain from these enhancements becoming permanent.

A refundable EITC would put more money in the pockets of Virginia's hard-working families, who typically spend their money at local businesses. The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis estimates that a single parent earning the minimum wage with two kids would get back more than \$200 each year. Even making just half of the EITC refundable would put roughly \$40 million back into the pockets of working families.

Predatory Lending

VICPP has consistently supported a 36% annual percentage rate (APR) cap on interest rates for both payday and car title lenders and other legislation designed to either cap fees or limit the number of loans offered by predatory lenders.

Unfortunately, all bills to provide additional protections to consumers in lending practices failed to report. VICPP has consistently supported a 36% annual percentage rate (APR) cap on interest rates for both payday and car title lenders and other legislation designed to either cap fees or limit the number of loans offered by predatory lenders. 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.

Gun Violence



Rev. Charles Swadley and United Methodist Bishop Peter Weaver pose with Gabby Giffords and Mark Kelly in Richmond.

Governor McAuliffe's Gun Deal

In an agreement reached between the McAuliffe administration and Republicans, concealed handgun permit state reciprocity will be restored. This reverses a decision made by Attorney General Mark Herring to rescind such agreements with states considered to have less strict concealed carry practices. In exchange, House and Senate Republicans agreed to pass legislation to 1) increase state police presence at gun shows to perform voluntary background checks and 2) create a felony for those who have a protective order against them to possess a firearm. As often happens with compromises such as this one, both gun control proponents and opponents were unhappy with the deal. Virginia 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 themselves. 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 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.

Healthcare Access

Virginia has the opportunity to accept Federal funding to expand high quality affordable healthcare to 400,000 individuals. These individuals and families make less than 138 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) which is equal to an annual income of \$16,243 for an individual and \$27,724 for a family of three in 2015. Currently, a majority of these individuals fall into a "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. Many of these individuals are working, but have jobs where health insurance is not a benefit. Virginia has already left \$3 billion on the table in available Federal funding. If the Commonwealth chooses to accept federal funds, 100% of the expanded program will be paid for through 2017, and over the next few years until 2020 when the federal match drops to 90%. The Governor plans to use a provider assessment, or tax on hospitals, to pay for the state's portion. Closing the coverage gap will allow for \$352 million over the next two years in state budget savings for Community Service Boards, the Department of Corrections and the current Medicaid program. The funding will also help safety net providers, including hospitals, stay in business. VICPP is disappointed that the biennium budget does not include the Federal funding to provide 400,000 uninsured Virginians access to Medicaid. The budget reflects this action by removing 3 billion dollars in Federal funding, reversing the identified state savings and reinstating processes to reform the current Medicaid system. Reforming the Certificate of Public



Need Program was another popular healthcare topic this year. A bill to reform the program was continued to 2017 in Senate Finance. This bill would have removed some barriers for opening some health care facilities without health department approval that is aimed at demonstrating a “public need” for the facility. As a result, if the consensus bill (HB 350, Byron) had passed, some facilities would have been permitted to open to provide limited diagnostic capabilities such as MRI and in exchange, the owners of the facilities would have had to provide a certain amount of free or charity care to low-income individuals.

Tied in with the COPN legislation was a provider assessment fee for hospitals. Provider assessments are one way to garner federal match funding for facilities that agree to submit a percentage of their earnings (a provider assessment). The fees and match would be used to offset the decrease in federal funding to hospitals that is a part of the Affordable Care Act. The provider assessment fee could also be used for filling the gap once Medicaid is expanded, and the federal match drops from 100% to 90% (in 2020).

Once the provider assessment initiative was inserted into HB 350, the measure was re-referred to the Senate Finance Committee and effectively killed for the year.

In summary, COPN is one piece of the healthcare puzzle which is far from solved. The puzzle has three main pieces: COPN, Medicaid expansion, and a means to provide the 10% of state funding annually for Medicaid expansion once the federal match decreases from 100% to 90%. Hospitals have proposed the provider assessment fee as a way of solving the three-piece puzzle. With the failure of the General Assembly to expand Medicaid, the puzzle remains incomplete.

Virginia Consumer Voices for Healthcare program will continue to monitor these policy discussions. Stay tuned for summer activities to continue to highlight this moral imperative before our legislators.

Immigration

Driver’s Licenses

Bills to provide documented immigrants access to driver’s licenses, HB 695, HB 987, HB 1082 were incorporated into HB 1316 (Del. Bloxom) and continued on to 2017 in the form of a study on creation of a driver’s license card for immigrants. The policy staff of the Department of Motor Vehicles is tasked with carrying out the study, and they have already begun their work. Stay tuned for notice of a public hearing which they indicate will be sometime in April.

A growing number of states (11 states and DC) offer access to driving privileges to all residents, regardless of immigration status. Providing access can help ensure that all drivers have the necessary qualifications and insurance to be on the road, something that affects all Virginians, immigrant or not. Access to driving privileges also supports participation in the local economy and allows people to complete basic day-to-day tasks like taking their kids to school or going to medical appointments. We are all safer when each individual who drives is qualified and has the legal privilege to do so

Anti-Immigrant Bills

This year we saw a series of bills that would negatively affect our immigrant communities. SB 270 (Sen. Garrett) and HB 1039 (Del. Pogge), bills to prevent “sanctuary cities,” which would undermine community relations between law enforcement and immigrant communities. We maintain that undocumented immigrants are more likely to talk with law enforcement, report suspicious activity and crimes, etc., when they feel safe talking with law enforcement. SB 705 (Sen. Black) and HB 481 (Del. Marshall) would prevent local jails from releasing immigrants who are subject to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detainers. Additionally, these

actions may place burdens on localities as they would be forced to hold more people in jail as they await trial. The ACLU has posited that holding individuals beyond their term in jail is unconstitutional. SB 705 and HB 1039 failed to report but SB 270 and HB 481 are currently being considered by the Governor. VICPP has signed on with other organizations to encourage Governor McAuliffe to veto both bills. Immigrants make important contributions to Virginia’s economy. They spend income as consumers and contribute to state and local taxes. Yet, many residents are unable to drive because of their immigration status, further impeding their integration into our communities and our economy. Possessing driving privileges brings freedom for the individual to drive to work, church, recreation, and shopping.

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.

This session, in the House Privileges and Elections’ Elections subcommittee, Delegate Mark Cole, the chairman, made an unprecedented motion to place all of the redistricting bills in a “block” to be voted on together. The motion to table the block of bills was supported by a majority of the subcommittee members thus killing all House legislation to create a more fair process. In the Senate, three bills calling for an independent redistricting commission, SB 31 (Sen. Lucas), SB 59 (Sen. Howell) and SB 191 (Sen. Miller) passed the Senate but were quickly killed in the House P&E subcommittee. We support the work on redistricting of One Virginia 2021, which reports regularly and often on the progress (or lack thereof) being made on 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.

We will also closely track related concerns such as the implementation of Virginia's voter I.D. law to make sure that people are not systematically disenfranchised from voting. Virginia should seek to expand its voter rolls, not contract them. This includes bringing felons who have completed their time back on the voter rolls as soon as possible.

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. VICPP has joined the efforts of the Virginia No Kid Hungry program, Virginia Hunger Solutions and the First Lady's Dorothy McAuliffe's office. In Virginia, approximately 300,000 students are going to school hungry. Last year 244 schools were able to expand their breakfast programs but an additional 310 schools applied to participate but were unable to due to a lack of funding. This year Governor McAuliffe has doubled the funding for alternative school breakfast models to reduce childhood hunger and increase classroom performance

The budget approved by the General Assembly includes the \$2 million from Governor McAuliffe's budget to support the Breakfast After the Bell Initiative. The budget conferees added clarifying language to the Breakfast-After-The-Bell program so that only elementary schools with more than 45 percent of their students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch meals may apply for the funds. This initiative is vital to the continuing success of our students across the Commonwealth, and VICPP is glad to see the funding included for each year in the biennium budget.

Look for town hall meetings

You still have an opportunity to directly influence your lawmakers by joining VCV and VICPP supporters at the various senator and delegate "town hall" meetings, held in the local districts soon after the General Assembly session is complete.

These meetings are great opportunities to use our voices to hold lawmakers accountable for not approving Medicaid expansion, as well as rejecting progress on criminal justice reform, raising the minimum wage, immigration, raising the felony robbery threshold and other issues important to us. Both the Virginia House of Delegates and the Virginia Senate rejected Governor McAuliffe's budget plan, which included healthcare expansion. House speaker Bill Howell said he would direct Virginia's poor to visit "free clinics" when they need care – "free" as in "paid for by Virginia tax-payers." We need to remind the General Assembly that while charity has its place, it is no substitute for real healthcare insurance.

Monitor your legislators' websites and Twitter feeds, or the local media, for information on upcoming gatherings.

A few talking points:

- Having healthcare insurance can help keep people in the workforce and help keep people from plunging into poverty due to medical bills due to illness or injury.
- 11% of Virginians are still

uninsured. Ask the legislators "what is YOUR plan to cover your constituents?" Then tell them that community health clinics and emergency rooms are not the same as having comprehensive healthcare coverage. These provide primary or urgent care but don't cover ongoing needs to get or stay healthy such as maintenance medications, physical or occupational therapy or diagnostic testing.

–Having healthcare coverage is a moral imperative and human right. Ask "How do you justify your position as a person of faith relative to not supporting closing the coverage gap in Virginia?"

–Virginia is losing \$4.4 billion a day by not taking Federal funding to cover low income/wage persons or their families – there are no good arguments for choosing to devastate the Virginia economy and hurt people by not accepting these dollars when Virginia accepts many other federal dollars (25% of the state budget).

—Karen L. Cameron

UPCOMING TOWN HALLS:

■ **Del. Nick Freitas, Meet and Greet hosted by American Individualists, Purcellville Library, Va April 4, 5 pm**

■ **Sen. Amanda Chase, Chesterfield office, April 7, 7 pm**

■ **Del. Chris Peace, New Kent Town Hall, May 5, 7 pm**



Sen. Dick Saslaw conducts a town hall meeting in his 35th District following last year's legislative session.