

Virginia General Assembly

2017 Report from Delegate

Vivian Watts

This annual newsletter is about competing priorities and values. Needs and tough choices of real people and families must be balanced against uncertain revenues and policies driven by federal uncertainty. Holding to the past competes with having future natural and economic resources. And politics too often competes with good government. We can meet the challenges together —

Vivian



CONGRESSIONAL HEALTHCARE REFORM

Why Virginia is a big loser . .

Here are elements of the perfect storm that has and will hurt Virginia's people and our economy:

Virginia was one of 19 states that *didn't expand Medicaid* under "Obamacare" (Affordable Care Act)

- ▶ This has *cost us \$10.5 billion* over the last 4 years.
- ▶ Even if the ACA isn't repealed, we will continue to lose \$6.6 million a day in federal taxes paid by Virginians but not returned to help Virginians.
- ▶ Some proposals to replace the ACA make the loss even worse by permanently *reducing funds to states, like Virginia, that didn't expand Medicaid* and giving more money to states that did expand.

Virginia's Medicaid spending has been one of the lowest in the nation for a very long time. Currently, *we're 47th*.

- ▶ Unlike most states, Virginia doesn't cover any adults in poverty except elderly or disabled persons and pregnant women.
- ▶ Replacing Medicaid with state *block grants digs Virginia's rock bottom level of healthcare in even deeper*, including
 - ▶ making it even harder to get into a nursing home (Virginia's bare bones Medicaid program won't admit a poor person unless they can't do at least two of the basic tasks of eating, bathing, dressing, toileting, walking, and continence);

- ▶ not covering mental health and substance abuse treatment;



- ▶ continuing to use state taxes to pay the full cost of healthcare in prisons and jails;
- ▶ increasing the waiting list for people with intellectual, developmental, or physical disabilities to get services;
- ▶ reducing even more the number of doctors who'll see Medicaid patients (In Virginia, doctors get 1/3 more for seeing higher income patients over 65 on Medicare than low income patients on Medicaid); and
- ▶ leaving over 400,000 adults living in poverty – 70% are in a household where someone has a job – without basic healthcare: Care that could significantly reduce chronic disease and death.

Virginia stands to bear an *extraordinarily heavy impact from federal budget cuts*.

- ▶ Virginia has the highest % of military and federal employees of any state and we have a very large presence of high-wage federal contractors. Therefore, potential federal budget cuts are a major economic threat. We have no room to sustain even Virginia's meager healthcare services by *shifting hundreds of millions of dollars in state funds from other needs* without severely undercutting current efforts to increase
 - ▶ workforce training initiatives to fill new jobs in diverse, non-federal fields;
 - ▶ school funding;
 - ▶ making mental health services available; and
 - ▶ bringing employers to all areas of Virginia if rural hospitals close.

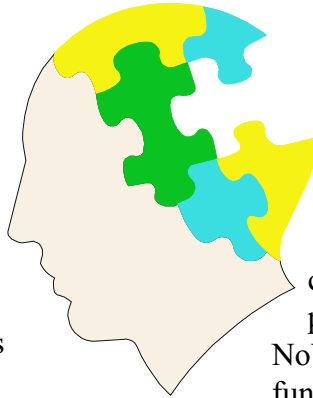
MENTAL HEALTH

Unmet Needs with Tragic Consequences . .

Driven by the determination of Senator Deeds – who lost his son during a *mental crisis* – we continue to make some progress addressing a daunting challenge.

- ▶ Treatment is too often followed by a relapse. Staff of virtually every program we visited said the greatest problem is people not having a place to live .. *it's hard to stay on stabilizing medicines living out of a backpack*. This year's budget begins to fund housing.
- ▶ Community Service Boards are the point of entry to get publicly-funded mental health, intellectual disability, and substance abuse services. Service levels vary widely among the 40 CSBs. Money in this budget funds *same-day mental assessments* including a physical exam throughout Virginia. However, actually providing crisis services that same day costs a whopping \$150 million, which will be a major funding problem in 2021.

As I noted in last year's newsletter, because closing psychiatric hospitals wasn't replaced with community services, *over 20% of people in local jails have a serious mental illness* compared to about 4% in 1955. I also noted that nationwide "the risk of being killed during a police incident is 16 times greater for individuals with untreated mental illness."



- ▶ New legislation will require the Virginia Board of Corrections to *investigate every death in a local jail*.
- ▶ Unfortunately, however, the legislature refused to fund the Governor's request to train jail staff to screen for mental illness, which *could prevent deaths*.

I look forward to continuing to serve on the Deeds commission. We are now focusing on *informed law enforcement responses* to those in mental crisis. I'm optimistic this training also will bring greater humanity and effectiveness to encounters with people with autism, developmental disabilities, and Alzheimer's.

Opioids and Substance Abuse . .

If Virginia had expanded Medicaid, 60,000-70,000 Virginians with serious mental illness would have been covered. Including substance abuse treatment, the estimate is over 100,000.

Maryland, West Virginia, and Kentucky did expand Medicaid under the ACA, which gave addicts access to outpatient treatment and decreases in hospitalizations for substance abuse of 69% – 87%. In the same period

(2013-15), hospitalizations in Virginia increased by 17% driven by the opioid crisis.

Drug overdose is now the leading cause of death nationwide for people under 50. Ever since prescription drug abuse took the life of a Delegate's sister over a decade ago, I've voted for measure after measure to toughen penalties, track prescribing, and establish court alternatives focused on treatment. This year, we are funding 9,000 additional REVIVE! Kits and 6,600 units of Narcan Nasal Spray to revive individuals who have overdosed on opiates.

INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES (ID / DD)

Closing the NoVa Training Center . .

In 1999, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that ID/DD persons were to be served in community settings whenever possible. It took another court order in 2012 before Virginia began to act. Now nearly half the 1,118 ID/DD persons once in the state's five "training centers" have been relocated into private group homes.

Challenges about whether money from the first center sold (Chesapeake) was actually used to provide ID/DD services in the community armed NoVa families to fight to ensure their needs would be funded more adequately in this high cost area.

- ▶ This year's budget has strong language to carve out money from the sale of the valuable 81-acre site on Braddock Rd to go to expanded community services, including housing located in NoVa (despite the higher cost) to keep families in contact.

Long Waiting Lists . .

The court settlement also covered 17,000 persons statewide with ID/DD not living in training centers, resulting in very long waiting lists for services. Every year we try to reduce the years it takes for those on the waiting list to get help by adding slots *funded under Medicaid waivers* – 44 were added for this year.

Unfortunately, the legislature refused the Governor's request to fund overtime for in-home health services and respite care, which also help the elderly and physically disabled. Under a federal ruling, providers are frozen into 40 hours, making it very hard to schedule needed care or work around unavoidable problems.

Vivian, the two issues I'm most concerned about are:

- Economy Transportation Education Health Care Mental Health
- Environment Personal Freedoms Taxes Law Enforcement Other _____

My concerns about #1 are

My concerns about #2 are

Please cut along the line below to include your name and address, which is printed on the back, with your response.

JOB

Strong Momentum in Many Areas . .



Governor McAuliffe's energetic efforts brought in a record **167,100 net new jobs** in the first 3 years of his term – more than any other Virginia Governor.

June **unemployment was only 3.7%, well-below the national rate** and is half Virginia's 2010 peak unemployment.

Over half the 1.5 million job vacancies in Virginia in the next decade will require less than a 4-year college degree but more than high school. The top needs are in

- ▶ the building trades where unions, employers, and trade associations are all stepping up to provide apprenticeships;
- ▶ health technology where community college certificate programs are reaching out to veterans; and
- ▶ cyber security where NoVa educational programs have a flagship role in meeting the need.

Such examples of **fully employing military experience and encouraging apprenticeships are extremely important** in ongoing efforts to strengthen Virginia's ability to compete for high paying jobs and broaden our economy to reduce its dependence on federal spending.

ENVIRONMENT

Seeds of Progress . .

Virginia is extremely vulnerable to sea level rise. This is just one reason Virginia was the first state to announce we will continue putting in place a **state Power Plan to reduce carbon emissions** even though federal requirements have been put on hold.

Since 2013, the 3,236 new jobs created in Virginia's solar industry is twice the number of persons still mining coal.

By 2021, two wind turbines should be up and operating 27 miles off Virginia Beach with planned expansion providing power for half a million homes. This is only the second project in the nation to harvest **the potential of sustained, strong off-shore winds**.

K-12 EDUCATION

The Battle for Funding . .

I've been frustrated for years with Fairfax County's **large class sizes** – more per teacher at every grade level than most other schools in Virginia. Bills and budget amendments to change state funding to correct this imbalance repeatedly fail because more funds to Fairfax means less for others.

There is agreement, however, that we should move faster to get statewide support for public education back up to pre-2008 levels. Fairfax got a \$29.4 million increase in state funding for this year.

However, **for kids and teachers in the classroom, this means little**.

The new state funds were swallowed up by updated national accounting standards – driven by retirees living longer – requiring that we put more into pension funds or risk losing our top AAA bond rating.



By authority of
Delegate Vivian Watts
8717 Mary Lee Lane
Annandale, VA 22003

Phone: 703 / 978 - 2989
FAX: 703 / 978 - 2750
email: vwatts@erols.com
website: vivianwatts.com

PRSRT STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
MERRIFIELD, VA
PERMIT NO.1517

GERRYMANDERING

Hurts You and NoVa in Countless Ways . .

The #1 concern I heard from people this year was, “stop changing voting districts to serve politics, not people.” I couldn’t agree more !! *Voters can’t hold me accountable or get help if they don’t know who represents them.*

- ▶ In 2001, my district was changed by 40%. In 2011, it was shifted by over 42% – in some cases, returning communities that had been taken away!
- ▶ There are communities in my district split up in ways it takes a scavenger hunt map to explain.

In 2001, the goal was to pack as many voters who support the minority party into as few districts as possible. Indeed, after the election, there were 13 fewer Democrats in the 100-member House. Packing districts biases Congress in the same way. This fall, for the first time, the Supreme Court will hear a packing case coming out of Wisconsin.

In 2011, carving up communities statewide was the tool used to pack African-American voters and marginalize their influence. This March, the Supreme Court ruled Virginia House districts must be re-drawn.

NoVa is especially hurt by packing. *We’re marginalized in meeting transportation needs, state school funding, and public safety.* The record number of vetoes by Governor McAuliffe – elected in a statewide race where gerrymandering has no effect – reflects the impact gerrymandering has to undercut gun safety, voting rights, public schools, women’s health, and non-discrimination.

TRANSPORTATION

Progress close to home . .

During the battle in 2013 for regional funding to be controlled by and used solely in NoVa, it was hard to predict what the four different sources of revenue would raise. After doing an update for a media tour, I can now report in the first 6 years we will invest *\$2.5 billion new dollars in NoVa road and transit improvements.*

Metro is, to say the least, “challenging” . .

I toured a stretch of tracks closed under Safe-Track. The most basic and most troubling of all the problems I saw was 40-year-old, rotten rail ties. No wonder tracks got out of alignment! Safe-Track’s long-delayed repairs and upgrades are over. Ahead are the “simple” challenges:

- ▶ invest in *ongoing maintenance* to assure safety and avoid high cost, complex repairs;
- ▶ continue reducing unnecessary positions and overtime but engage the workers (whose salaries are in line with other transit systems) to make other *operational improvements*; and
- ▶ the biggest challenge of all, find a regional solution for *adequate, ongoing funding.*

* * *
Back home with
fellow Delegates after seeing
“Wonder Woman”

Filler-Corn, Watts, Herring, Murphy

