

# Virginia General Assembly

2019 Report from Delegate

## Vivian Watts

*The state legislature acts on many issues that touch your life. I've tried to give you meaningful background on some of particular significance. Nothing is simple. Please share your thoughts on any of the thousands of measures we considered (including my bills!) I truly value hearing from you. —*

*Vivian*



### GUN SAFETY

Every day three Virginians die from gun fire – two are suicides.

It's been 20 years since two Columbine High School students opened fire .. 12 years since Virginia Tech .. 7 years since Sandy Hook. Sacred places of worship were brutally attacked: Charleston Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church .. rural Sutherland Texas First Baptist Church .. Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue. This summer, Dayton's nightspot and El Paso's Walmart mass shootings came on the heels of Virginia Beach's workplace massacre.

I refuse to accept that Americans are more violent than people in other developed countries. For the most part in fact, based on the number of guns in circulation, we don't have more homicides. The difference is we have 3 to 4 times more guns.

It's essential that we have commonsense laws to address safe use of firearms. In the regular Session – as in past years – such proposals were summarily killed in subcommittee. After Virginia Beach, the Governor called a Special Session to re-consider:

- ▶ background checks for all (non-family) sales;
- ▶ a due process to address “red flags” that someone might be a danger to themselves or others;
- ▶ limits on high-capacity weaponry;
- ▶ restore limit on buying more than one handgun a month;
- ▶ local control over guns in public facilities and during demonstrations;
- ▶ demonstrated competence for a conceal-carry permit;
- ▶ un-supervised access to guns by children.

After just 90 minutes, the July Special Session was recessed to meet again after the November 5<sup>th</sup> election.

Picture of  
Mary Read  
memorial bench

### MENTAL HEALTH

Violence has many faces. Most perpetrators are not mentally ill. In fact, people with mental illness are 23 times ***more likely to be victims*** of violence.

FBI reports fewer than 25% of mass shooters were diagnosed with mental illness. Mental illness is defined as “a serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities.” These are not people who can carefully plan out the most lethal possible mass killing.

***As a society, we must struggle with the many other roots of incomprehensible violence, hatred, and hyper fear.*** But long overdue help for those suffering from mental illness must not be obscured.

**Meeting needs . .** Passing Medicaid expansion in 2018 gave us \$1.75 billion new federal funds for this year. Solid work by the Jt Mental Health Committee, that was convened after Sen. Deeds' son committed suicide and on which I sit, clearly identified priorities for these funds:

- ▶ for our schools, \$12 million of the \$36 million it will take for one counselor for every 250 students (as recommended by the American Counselors Assoc);
- ▶ \$7.8 million statewide to provide same day crisis services;
- ▶ \$6.4 million to fill shortages in state mental health hospitals created by timely action to admit people in life-threatening danger to themselves or others;
- ▶ \$5.2 million to expand community support for people waiting to be released from state hospitals;
- ▶ \$3 million for permanent supportive community housing for addicts and those with mental illness;
- ▶ \$1.2 million to pilot programs that can back-up schools with integrated mental health services for children who need additional care. Virginia ranks 47<sup>th</sup> nationally in services for children under 18.

# VIRGINIA'S FUTURE

## GREEN ENERGY . .

One of the **most critical** and dynamic sources of new jobs is green energy development. Virginia has the 4<sup>th</sup> highest concentration of STEM-trained workers in the nation. We should be a prime competitor.

Last year, the General Assembly directed that significant investments must be made in green energy, using charges for electricity made to carry-out federal limits on fossil fuels under the federal Clean Air Act. Federal requirements were abandoned. Virginia chose to proceed.

**Wind power . .** After much planning, this summer Dominion Energy started construction on two massive wind turbines 27 miles off our coast. **Virginia is ideally located** to lease a 112,800 acre site (the first in federal waters) that is only 80-foot deep and out of migratory bird flyways. By next spring, power actually will be being generated from much higher sustained winds than any on land. These turbines and transmission lines will pave the way for constructing hundreds of turbines, enough to meet the needs of over 500,000 homes.

**Solar power . .** There are two changes that must take place to utilize the **full potential** of solar power. First, transmission lines must be changed to capture power from many small sites, instead of just a few large fossil fuel or atomic power plants. Other states have **done more to allow customers to share solar power**. The 2019 Session did make a leap forward by allowing localities to generate and share solar power among buildings. Fairfax County is advertising for solar companies to install solar at as many as 130 buildings and schools. This could triple the solar power currently produced in all Northern Virginia.



The second challenge is **storing peak sun energy** to serve evening household needs. Nationwide, large-scale battery storage projects have more than quadrupled in the last 5 years. To comply with the General Assembly requirements for more green energy, this summer, Dominion Power asked the SCC to approve investing \$33 million to build four battery projects to test different applications.

**Coal Ash Contamination . .** This is **a long-standing toxic hazard** of coal-powered electric generation plants affecting human water supplies and marine species. This year, we finally passed legislation to require that coal ash be removed from all unlined ground enclosures. At least 25% must be encapsulated into solid materials safe for re-use. The remainder must be moved to federally-approved lined storage enclosures.

## TOP STATE FOR BUSINESS . .

For the 4<sup>th</sup> time in 13 years, Virginia was ranked by CNBC as #1 State for Business. With 30% of our economy depended on federal spending, we had dropped as low as 11<sup>th</sup> because of federal cuts and sequestration. Recently, added defense spending boosted our economy.

Virginia's top rankings were both related to education. We ranked **first in the nation in the quality of our workforce and first in education** from kindergarten through research and advanced degrees. Our lowest rankings across the 10 categories were in cost to do business and the cost of living.



There is a recognized need to expand our economy from over-dependence on federal spending. Amazon's decision to located headquarter offices in Virginia underscored two points:

- ▶ strengthening Virginia's STEM degrees was the right incentive that further strengthens our economic position .. not out-bidding others in cash giveaways;
- ▶ Amazon's decision sent a wide message to other major employers to look closely at Virginia. People need jobs throughout Virginia, especially in urban cores, down-state, and Appalachia.

## EDUCATION . .

We funded a **5% teacher salary increase** by adding \$72.8 million for 2% over the 3% already in the budget. This finally reverses the fall, that began with the 2008 recession, in state funding per pupil adjusted for inflation. Fairfax gets \$23.5 million more in state aid.

We also set aside up to \$52.4 million ear-marked for each public college and university that **doesn't raise under-grad tuition**.

Progress is being made in developing relevant **post-high school professional credentials** through community college and state-certified apprenticeship programs. Increased union and trade involvement would bring in more skilled instructors.

*Please, let me hear from you . . .*

## Vivian, my focus in dealing with gun violence is

I'm also concerned about  the Economy  Transportation  Education  Health Care  Taxes  
 Mental Health  Environment  Personal Freedoms  Law Enforcement  Other \_\_\_\_\_

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

## PERSONAL IMPACTS

### TAX REFORM . .

If you paid your 2018 Virginia income taxes by July 1<sup>st</sup>, you'll receive *a one-time refund* by October 15<sup>th</sup>. It's for \$220 (Joint) or \$110 (Single) but not more than what you paid. This was the only way to handle last year's state tax increases triggered by federal tax changes. For 2019, we targeted ongoing relief to taxpayers hit hardest by the federal tax changes. Virginia's *standard deduction was increased* by 50% and the federal \$10,000 cap on local tax deductions *won't* apply to Virginia taxes.

### JUSTICE REFORM . .

Drivers licenses can't be revoked *solely* for not paying court fees. Fines and costs will still be charged, but persons won't end up in the impossible position of not paying because they lost their job because they can't drive.

*Mental health needs of persons in local jail* will get serious attention through requiring up-to-date screening, discharge planning for serious mental illness, and giving probation officers medical and mental health records.

### PROTECTING CHILDREN . .

All religious practitioners are now *required to report child abuse*, except for information that cannot be disclosed under religious doctrine.

If a suspected *abused or neglected child lived in another state* in the last 5 years, protective services must determine if the child is on that state's abuse/neglect registry.

All *newborns* have the full protections of the multiple hospital reviews and appeal procedures we passed last year to apply to all patients and especially to those on life-support. Since 2000, there have only been 2 abortions in the last 3 months of pregnancy in Virginia.

### TEENS AND NICOTINE . .

E-cigarette use by high schoolers almost doubled from 2017 to 2018 reaching over 20% and almost 5% in middle school. (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) Concern about effects on the developing brain and nervous system and about marketing targeted at youth, led to *increasing the age to purchase any tobacco product to 21*. Active-duty military are exempted.

### VULNERABLE SENIORS . .

Bank staff who suspect a customer is being *financially exploited* now have explicit authority to refuse or to delay disbursing funds and notify law enforcement.

### REAL ID . .

To board a plane or enter a secure federal facility, by October 2020, you will need to upgrade your Virginia drivers license to REAL ID. *No change is needed to drive, vote, or conduct everyday business.*

Despite the October 2020 federal deadline, the Department of Defense began rolling out new security guidance this summer and people without REAL ID were denied access to Quantico and Fort Belvoir. If your lifestyle will require REAL ID, go to DMV's website to see the list of original documents you must bring to prove your identity, legal presence in the U.S., social security number, and Virginia residency.



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

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

**Phone: 703 / 978 - 2989**  
**FAX: 703 / 978 - 2750**  
**email: [vwatts@erols.com](mailto:vwatts@erols.com)**  
**website: [vivianwatts.com](http://vivianwatts.com)**

## THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY

400 years ago, in Virginia, democracy was established in the New World. A month later, the first slave ship was diverted from the Carribean and landed in Virginia. I attended both commemorations. Here are my thoughts.

The U.S. form of government and our Constitution grew directly from the seeds planted in Jamestown on July 30, 1619. English colonists had arrived 12 years earlier. Few survived but more came. Within 4 years, a royal governor was given complete power .. which he used with “pitiless severity”.. to ensure survival and a profit for investors.

By 1619, hard labor had established 11 villages and farms. Those who did the work were determined to have a say. Two *were selected by* each village and farm. As this “general assembly” met for 6 days, the first Speaker observed, “peace is best preserved by giving ... *information to the people*. [This] is the most legitimate engine of government.”

They passed laws on issues we still debate today: land use, drinking, public safety, and taxes. Most important, they were able to use this first legislature as *a check on un-bridled executive authority*.

This was worthy of commemoration this summer.

However, what I found deeply challenging about commemorating representative democracy was facing each step of its history. The first Africans were captured as slaves but they weren’t reduced to enslaved *property* until 1640. That came from laws duly passed by the General Assembly.

Centuries of callous inhumanity wove its tentacles into *law after law supporting ever greater inhumanity* in the name of building America. Very slowly most laws have been erased by people of good will; nevertheless, the ingrained prejudice within them challenges us to constantly examined government actions for the effect on people of color.



Since Virginia and later the United States were structured on representative democracy, who is allowed to vote for the representatives also has been an epic battle. For the poor, women, and all minorities, gaining *the right to vote and then not being barred from actually voting or not having their vote devalued by gerrymandering* has been essential to gaining equality under laws passed by otherwise narrowly chosen representatives.

Finally, I repeatedly came back to Virginia’s unique state seal. It was designed by George Mason, who also originated the Bill of Rights protecting individual freedoms. The seal champions the balance of power between the legislature and executive.

Modeled on Virginia’s, the constitution of the United States was the first .. starting with *We the People* .. to put the legislature ahead of the executive.