

Virginia General Assembly

2021 Report from Delegate

Vivian Watts

I've loved all the complex worlds a broad education opened for me as the first in my family to graduate from college. But COVID-19 shone an intense – sometimes troubling – spotlight into every sphere. This newsletter underscores some of the most significant areas and what is revealed about challenges we face.

Vivian



ESSENTIAL WORKERS

Loved ones were lost. But most of us were able to make personal decisions about our pandemic health concerns. We were inconvenienced but we could choose. Essential workers are persons who could not.

First and foremost, despite increasing stress, healthcare workers remained steadfast in their dedication to save lives. In NoVa, most were protected to the greatest degree possible with up-to-date building technology and adequate PPE.

Across Virginia, lives were saved because we expanded access to Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act in 2019, but COVID revealed the tragic result of under-staffing nursing homes. Virginia is one of the few states with no staffing standards and **almost 30% more of our COVID deaths were in nursing homes than in the other states**. Many groups are now getting behind my 20-year battle for increased staffing for virtually helpless seniors in nursing homes on Medicaid.

COVID also spotlighted worker safety for some of the lowest paid – but essential – workers serving the public or working in close quarters. Preventing and compensating work injuries or disease is getting more attention. However, a bill to provide 1-hour of paid sick leave for every 30 days of work for all essential workers – from healthcare and retail to childcare and law enforcement – was reduced to just covering home healthcare workers.

Despite the fact we raised Virginia's minimum wage to \$12 an hour over the next 3 years, national polls show **twice as many lower income workers are applying for a different job because of personal safety concerns and childcare hurdles, as well as low wages**.



EDUCATION

Parents want what's best for their children and they saw COVID erase priceless months and months of normal social development and learning. Many faced the impossible task of juggling their own job demands with 24-hour parenting.

Teachers committed to the full development of their students were stymied without personal contact. Very few had the software capability – especially working from home – to best use virtual learning to get students more fully engaged. When schools opened to half the room remote and half in person, older schools didn't have adequate broadband to serve all classes.

For many **students** broadband wasn't available, the family couldn't afford it, or other family members needed to be on the computer. Particularly for special needs students, computer learning couldn't give them what they needed.

Bottomline: COVID underscored action is critical on two major issues: the teacher shortage and educational inequality.

- ▶ Virginia and Fairfax have a teacher shortage, in part because **Virginia teacher salaries rank last in the U.S. compared to full-time, year-round workers**. Unaddressed school health concerns and the stress of teaching under the COVID restrictions may drive more to leave. While we raised the state's share for up to a 5% local salary increase, Fairfax County only felt it could fund a 2% increase. Hopefully, new federal COVID funds can fund at least a one-time bonus for these essential workers, as well as broadband and healthy air circulation.
- ▶ Final scores aren't in yet but **students without resources at home fell even further behind**. Reduced class sizes, relevant remedial programming, and equal technology access must be targeted to where need is the greatest within Fairfax as well as statewide.

VIRGINIA'S ECONOMY ... overall

As a state, we survived COVID better than most.

Federal direct payments to individuals shored-up basic spending across the nation. But Virginia further benefitted by having so many military and federal-related jobs that went virtual and stayed in place. This sustained our economy despite our large tourism and entertainment-related losses.

Personal savings have been at an all-time high and pent-up demand provides the potential for rapid recovery if worldwide supply chains are functioning. Outside analysts anticipate that, if COVID stays under control, statewide Virginia will get back to pre-pandemic employment levels by next spring.

VIRGINIA'S ECONOMY ... the challenge

With all statistics, I remind myself "*A man drowned in a stream whose average depth was 4 feet.*" For households with a total income of over \$100,000, "only" 1 in 15 persons lost their job. It was twice as bad for households between \$50,000 and \$100,000 and ***four times as bad for households below \$50,000.***

The stock market exploded – but 85% of the gains went to the wealthiest top 10%. Low income households don't have savings, retirement funds, or own property to keep them afloat and paying the rent is a far bigger chunk of the budget.

While we need to ***continue to help small businesses*** get back on their feet, COVID underscored the importance of two major challenges in strengthening Virginia's economy: housing costs and training skilled workers.

Training Skilled Workers

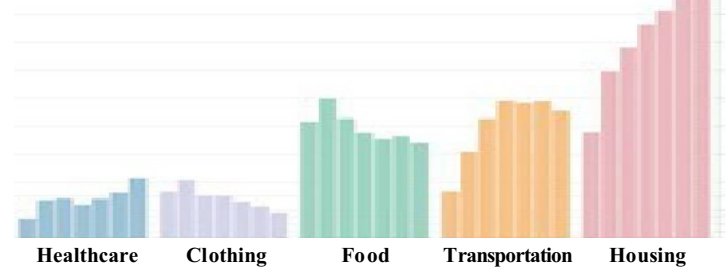
Up to 1 million of the 1.5 million job vacancies in Virginia over the next decade will require more than high school but less than 4 years of college. ***Upward mobility is open to workers with industry-recognized certification or an associate degree*** – particularly in cyber security, construction trades, and many areas of healthcare.

This year we passed the G3 tuition assistance program for community college students in households of 4 earning less than \$100,000 to "Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back." G3 targets five areas: healthcare, information technology, skilled trades, early childhood education, and public safety. In addition, we need to strengthen industry and union apprenticeships.

Cost of Housing

75 Years of How Americans Spend Their Money

1941-2014 Bureau of Labor Statistics <https://howmuch.net>



Households are increasingly burdened by the cost of housing. This chart is not just about "McMansions" driving up what people spend. It is more about lack of enough low-cost housing bumping up the price of all low- and middle-income housing.

The looming specter of COVID-triggered evictions added to the trauma of families – including GenXers under student loan debt – ***forced to pay beyond their means.*** Based on a 2020 General Assembly (GA) study of affordable housing, we adopted a state tax credit to increase the number of units built or renovated in Virginia under a 1986 federal program. Accountability built into federal requirements is key to preventing developer speculation on resales taking the housing out of the reach of low-income.

The Budget

Virginia expects more than \$4.3 billion in federal COVID American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds. Last year, the state received \$3.2 billion from the CARES Act and sent half to local governments. In contrast, ARP sends funds directly to cities and counties, for a total of nearly \$7 billion coming into Virginia, which must be spent by 2025.

Unlike the federal government, ***Virginia cannot run on deficit spending and we do not use one-time money for on-going expenses.*** This makes it difficult to use ARP to address under-staffed services due to non-competitive salaries. That said, our August Special Session will at least take-up COVID rescue funding for

- ▶ broadband expansion for students, tele-medicine, and jobs in under-developed regions;
- ▶ school renovation; and
- ▶ Virginia's \$750 million unemployment fund deficit.

In addition to ARP funds, Virginia has a budget ***surplus*** fueled by unexpected high-wage job growth, online spending, and \$2 billion in budget cuts at the beginning of COVID. Half will replenish our Rainy Day fund. The rest is available ***for services under the greatest stress.***

There is so much else I could have covered. Please, let me hear your concerns . . .

Vivian, my personal concern about COVID recovery is

My biggest ongoing concern(s) are Education Health Care Mental Health Environment
 Equality Law Enforcement Taxes Personal Freedoms **Other** _____

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

PROGRESS ON MANY FRONTS, including ...

GREEN ENERGY

Building on the 2020 Clean Economy Act to significantly reduce carbon emissions, the 2021 GA focused on transportation. **Electric vehicle initiatives** include expanding charging stations and rebates to make EV's more affordable to middle income buyers.

Transit got a major boost in the I-95 corridor with a \$3.7 billion federal/state/local funding agreement to add dedicated passenger rail track across the Potomac. It also takes advantage of CSX's new willingness to sell part of its right-of-way along I-95 to Richmond for extending VRE passenger service. For proposed initial transit options, go to www.drpt.virginia.gov/transit/springfield-to-quantico/.

Virginia is on track to **lead the nation in off-shore wind** with the two 600-foot pilot turbines producing more electricity than expected. If fully approved, 180 turbines 27 miles off shore will provide electricity to 660,000 homes by 2026. The GA declared wind and solar energy in the public interest for delivering low cost electricity but, later this year, the SCC will begin its decision on the degree that Dominion ratepayers will share the \$8 billion construction cost of the windfarm and high voltage transmission lines.

Virginia collected \$89 million since joining northeast states sales last year to cap and reduce CO2 power sector emissions. Half goes to **low-income household energy conservation** programs and 45% to assist communities and residents dealing with **recurrent flooding, sea level rise**, and flooding from severe weather events.

VOTING

Virginia moved from the bottom 10 to the top 10 states in voting access. In 2016, 41% of Americans cast their ballots other than at the polls compared to just 14% of Virginians. In 2020, 59% of Virginia's votes during COVID were cast absentee under new laws allowing no-excuse absentee voting, drop boxes, an election day postmark if received by Friday, and voters to be notified of paperwork errors that can be corrected before election day. Virginia uses an outside audit to test voting machine and reporting accuracy which is based on the integrity of each voter's unique number.

DISCRIMINATION

The 2020 Virginia Values Act defined and prohibits discrimination in housing, employment, public spaces, and credit. I am working on follow-up legislation to deal with workplace harassment through prevention procedures as well as prosecution.

HEALTH CARE

Work is underway to lower insurance premiums through federal-state shared funding of high risk individuals. Initiatives to reduce infant deaths include coverage of trained doulas to assist in childbirth.

HOMEOWNER ASSOCIATIONS

The Florida condo collapse underscores the importance of Virginia's focus two decades ago to protect homeowners with required reserve fund information given to potential buyers.

GUNS

Background checks are now required for all non-family related sales. The waiting period was increased from 3 to 5 days for clearance. The ban on buying more than one handgun a month is back in place. Our "Red flag" law allows the court to remove guns for domestic violence or potential suicide. Localities can again decide to ban guns in their buildings.

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
website: vivianwatts.com

MENTAL HEALTH

Nationwide, **people of all ages experiencing mental health trauma more than doubled under the social isolation, family stress, and economic insecurity of COVID**. In Virginia mental health services were already on overload, stemming from major reforms underway triggered by the violent death of a GA member's son after he was denied services.

State hospitals are at 100% capacity, driven in part by planned expansion of community services being incomplete. Mental hospitals are to help people in serious crisis – **they are not warehouses**. Admitting people beyond 100% capacity means all patients get less treatment from over-stretched staff and everyone's exposure to dangerous patient episodes is increased.

To save people's lives – in the fullest sense through treatment and prevention – onetime COVID funding and ongoing state revenue, as much as possible, needs to go to:

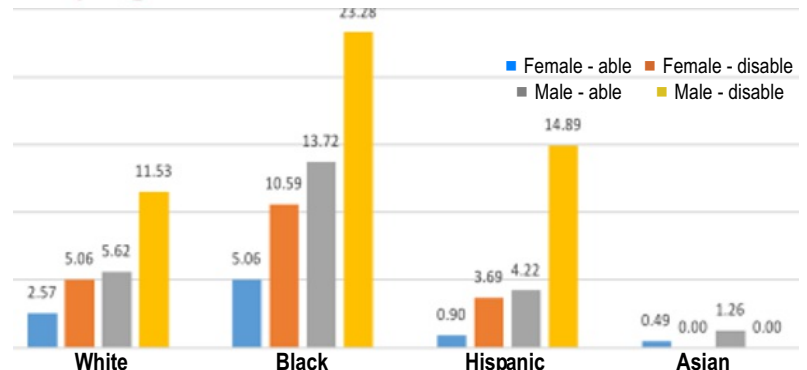
- ▶ fill staff shortages in mental health hospitals and establish competitive salaries to reduce turnover;
- ▶ expand same-day crisis services in the community and support services for people waiting to be released from state hospitals;
- ▶ provide a school counselor for every 250 students and establish integrated mental health services for students needing additional care.

Virginia ranks 3rd from the bottom in mental health services for children under 18.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

In 2018, a Virginia Tech survey of all Virginia schools revealed this disturbing picture of high school students per 1000 referred to court; it's almost the same for middle school.

Keeping Kids in Classrooms not Courtrooms



This underscores why **police cannot and should not be asked to do what schools must have the resources to do**.

Lack of mental health services has resulted in law enforcement officers spending, not hours but, days trying to get a person **into treatment instead of jailing them** on an assault charge. Criminal justice reform also means dealing with homelessness and addiction.

Virginia's history also makes it essential to deal with injustices, such as these recently removed by the GA:

- ▶ joining 23 other states in **ending the death penalty**;
- ▶ joining 49 other states in ending jury sentencing;
- ▶ **reforming marijuana laws** used to arrest minorities at 3 times the rate even though usage is the same; and
- ▶ with more people in prison for robbery than for drugs, changing the blanket penalty of 5 years to life to a range of penalties based on the threat or harm to the victim.