

# Virginia General Assembly

2022 Report from Delegate

## Vivian Watts

*“Make new friends but keep the old” was a great song we sang in church camp. With broad changes in legislative districts, this annual newsletter is going out to all I’ve enjoyed representing in HD39 (no longer in Fairfax) and all I hope to continue to represent in the new HD14 now centered in Annandale.*

*Here’s to meeting the challenges of the future —*

*Vivian*



### OUR ECONOMY

The cost of everything from groceries to government services is being hit from every direction. No one is sure how long this extraordinary stress will last and what “back to normal” will look like.

#### Challenge #1: Worker’s income

We are raising Virginia’s **minimum wage** from \$7.25 in 2019 in yearly increases to reach \$12 in 2023 and, if the General Assembly re-enacts the original bill, to \$15 by 2026. In addition, a state budget priority was making salaries more competitive in 3 critical areas:

- ▶ **Teachers** salaries will be increased 5% a year for the next two years – if localities raise their share of the state increase. This begins to address the fact that the average salary of Virginia’s teachers is the lowest in the nation compared to what others earn in each state.
- ▶ **Mental Health** professionals are in short supply nationwide and Virginia’s salaries are woefully low. The budget included \$110 million to raise salaries to just 50% of the competitive job market’s midpoint paid direct care workers.
- ▶ **Law Enforcement** supplemental salary increases are targeted to experienced and more highly trained officers. Years of budget tightening had resulted in “pay compression” producing loss of quality due to turnover.

#### Challenge #2: Inflation

In the last 12 months, price increases have essentially erased all the progress reported above and more.



#### Challenge #3: Reading Economic Forces

Virginia has record budget revenue currently, BUT ... Not only does Federal COVID recovery aid end in 2025 but, more worrisome, efforts to control inflation will cool spending and could cause hiring slowdowns and raise un-employment. Given those economic clouds, we brought our “Rainy Day” reserves to record highs first, before passing record tax cuts.

#### Challenge #4: Meaningful Tax Relief

I welcomed serious debate on how to target tax relief. The top 4 benefits below were in tax reform bills I’ve introduced:

- ▶ You’re getting a **tax rebate of up to \$250 (\$500 for couples)** deposited in your bank account or by mail. Your rebate is less if the tax you paid was less. Check [tax.virginia.gov/rebate](https://tax.virginia.gov/rebate) for your status.
- ▶ **Cutting the grocery tax from 2½ cents to 1 cent** will save an average family of 4 about \$300 a year.
- ▶ **Higher income families will benefit from raising the standard deduction** from \$9,000 to \$16,000 (or \$8,000 for single filers.)
- ▶ Low income working families will benefit from the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) **now being refundable** when it exceeds the tax owed. Unfortunately, expanding the childcare tax credit didn’t get considered.
- ▶ In addition, targeted tax cuts will benefit veterans over age 55 by **not taxing up to \$40,000 of military retirement income** (fully phased-in by 2025.) Teachers can take an additional tax deduction for up to **\$300 of supplies they buy for their classrooms**. The good news is teachers who don’t itemize can still benefit – the bad news is, as a deduction, it only reduces their state income tax by less than \$20.

I was glad to see our current budget surplus used for much-needed tax reform. More should be done to better reflect ability-to-pay, changes in the way we do business, and over-reliance on local real estate taxes.

## MENTAL HEALTH

The budget surplus allowed us to advance critical reforms that grew out of the 2014 violent death of a state senator's bi-polar son, including:

- ▶ programs for persons waiting to leave hospital treatment, such as individual discharge planning, supportive housing, and geriatric care;
- ▶ mobile crisis stabilization and additional crisis receiving centers throughout the state; and
- ▶ integrated access to state and private community psychiatric services for youth, including those of concern to school counselors.

The national 988 suicide hotline launched this July resulted in a 53% increase in Virginia calls the first month. So far, all calls are covered by Virginia staff, providing a faster connection and – when indicated – a response from a mobile crisis team which a national responder can't provide. Veterans can press "1" after dialing 988 and Spanish speakers can press "2."

However, many emergency departments and law enforcement were already in crisis responding to mental health needs. Most disturbing is that, among children and young adults – even before the isolation of COVID – the number of emergency room visits, hospitalizations due to self-harm, and deaths by suicide had all increased. Emergency room visits more than doubled from 2015 to 2021 to total 6% of all visits for 9 to 18-year-old Virginians. Boys accounted for 71% of deaths, with just over half of all suicides linked to guns.

Lack of staff is a serious barrier to helping people in mental crisis resume productive lives. On top of more persons seeking help, provider shortages nationwide, and Virginia's non-competitive salaries, more practitioners are expected to retire than there are graduates to replace them. We funded new psychiatric residencies, raised peer support medicaid payments, and will pay persons getting social work degrees for required supervised practice hours.



## HEALTHCARE

Starting in 2019, Virginia became one of all but 11 states to expand Medicaid to adults age 19-64 with incomes under 138% of poverty (i.e., \$29,436 for a family of 3 and \$17,237 for a single adult.) This extended basic health coverage to more than 650,000 Virginians.

However, Virginia hasn't joined other states with similar concern for the poor in nursing homes. Most

states require minimum staffing – Virginia does not. As a result, 59% of nursing homes don't have enough aides to meet federal standards. One tragic result of lack of basic staffing – so essential to humane, basic care – was that, in Virginia, 30% more of our total COVID deaths occurred in nursing homes.

Virginia focuses on aging in place. Our Medicaid program only pays for nursing home care if a person can't feed themselves, can't get to the bathroom, can't dress. They **must** have help. The problem is – with 2/3 of Virginia nursing home residents on Medicaid – basic staffing will cost \$25-\$40 million more annually.



AARP has joined with key advocates who were behind Virginia finally expanding Medicaid to low income adults. While workforce shortages may require we phase-in appropriate standards, I'm optimistic that my 20-year fight will finally bring accountability in how nursing homes spend Medicaid dollars.

## REPRODUCTIVE HEALTHCARE

For years, when most members have left, as a member of the Criminal Law subcommittee, I've sat into the night carefully crafting how to define crime. Each word must be fully considered as to whether it might entangle an innocent act or create a loophole.

The word "abortion" could encompass any fertilized egg not resulting in a full term, live birth. Trying to define what is a criminal act within an almost infinite range of biological issues that arise in pregnancies and appropriate medical responses is impossible. It is wrong.

*Roe v. Wade* was based on the right of privacy that had been set earlier in legalizing birth control. Under *Dobbs*, all reproductive decisions are back in question. For example, 62 members of the 140 member 2020 General Assembly voted against IUDs, the Pill, etc. because their definition of "conception" is the moment egg and sperm join – not the medical definition which is when the fertilized egg implants in the uterus 2 weeks later.

Untold other concerns involve miscarriage, in vitro fertilization, and the trauma and difficulty of legally establishing rape or incest. Here is just one case from testimony to ban cellphones while driving: A woman returning from her baby shower late at night ran off the road, was thrown out of the car, and found face down on the pavement – her cellphone a few feet away. No emergency room doctor should be weighing possible criminal charges with decisions that could preserve the pregnancy or preserve the health of this woman.

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

## Vivian, my personal concern about the current economy 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. ✂

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## REPRESENTING YOU IN THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

### NEW DISTRICTS

Every 10 years voting districts are re-drawn to balance population. This got complicated when the U.S. census wasn't done on time. So, instead of being elected in 2021 to represent a new district, I was re-elected to represent the old HD39 for 2 more years. In 2023, I will run in the new HD14.

Knowing some of you may be confused, I decided to use my annual newsletter to reach out to all:

😊 Folks **now in HD14 who were in HD39** are those who vote in Bren Mar, Camelot, Canterbury, Chapel, Wakefield, Ravensworth, Ridgelea (east of Prosperity Ave), and Wyanoke (west of Cherokee Ave) precincts.

😊 Folks **now in HD14 who were in HD38** (currently represented by Delegate Kory) are those who vote in Bristow, Brook Hill, Columbia, Heritage, Hummer, Lincolnia, Masonville (south of Holmes Run), Parklawn, Poe, Saint Albans, and Wyanoke (east of Cherokee Ave) precincts. As well as, those **who were in HD53** (currently represented by Delegate Simon) who live in Woodburn precinct, top of Camelot precinct, or Amberleigh apartments area.

😞 Folks who are **not in HD14** – whom I really enjoyed working with in the old HD39 – are in Alban, Crestwood, Edsall, Garfield, Greenspring, Lynbrook, North Springfield, and Saratoga precincts who are now in HD18. Danbury, Kings Park, and west of Guinea Rd precincts are now in HD15. Ridgelea (west of Prosperity) is now in HD12. Forestdale, Lane, and Pioneer precincts are now back with the district Delegate Sickles will run in HD17.

### MACHO MUFFLERS

I assure you, whoever represents you in Northern Virginia House and Senate districts all agree that equipment added to create loud mufflers and meet-ups where vehicles compete to make the most noise must be reigned in. Fairfax police say they are happy we, at least, got the General Assembly to restore the wording that allows police to go after “macho mufflers” as a muffler not in good repair and making excessive noise.

I hope the restored language, in fact, can and will be used for more aggressive enforcement than was taking place before March 2021. If not, I will again introduce language to close loopholes especially regarding meet-ups.



### TRANSPORTATION

I also assure you I'll continue to battle for equitable state transportation funding and a strong local voice to increase transit, enhance road capacity, and maintain local streets and commuting corridors. Cutting the gas tax in reaction to high gas prices can't let the over 20% of non-residents driving on our roads off the hook.

### VOTING

Finally, your representatives are committed to election integrity while welcoming all qualified voters. Virginia's latest reform extends same day voter registration for the military to all voters. Those who register after October 17<sup>th</sup> will use a provisional ballot that won't be processed until after the election to give officials time to verify the person's qualifications and assure they hadn't voted elsewhere. Someone giving false information can be charged with a felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison and/or a fine.

By authority of  
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## EDUCATION

I went to a poor rural school through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, was first in my family to graduate college, was a PTA president, and have a daughter teaching middle school math. I know the critical importance of public education and the support it must have:

- ▶ Removing the state sales tax on food initially threatened basic funding put in place to guarantee free **public education for all children** after public schools had been closed under “Massive Resistance” rather than integrated. Careful legislative crafting restored the guaranteed funding no longer generated by the food tax;
- ▶ School salaries were increased statewide. However, Fairfax schools still get less than a 3% COLA adjustment for the high cost of living in Northern Virginia, while the state police stationed here get over 25%. This is a major reason Fairfax **class sizes are so large**;
- ▶ Due to multiple lapses, a man worked as a Glasgow Middle School counselor for over 2 years, even though he’d been convicted in the Richmond area of soliciting sex from a minor. The **Virginia Education Department was asked if it can enforce state laws that weren’t followed** – if not, why not. In addition, state police are in the middle of a full upgrade to improve **local and state access to the national arrest and conviction database** maintained by the FBI.



## SHAPING VIRGINIA’S FUTURE

Good jobs are as central to household well-being as they are to Virginia’s economic well-being. In August, **Virginia’s unemployment rate was 10<sup>th</sup> lowest in the nation** at 2.7. Tourism’s slow recovery has kept Virginia from getting back all the jobs lost during the pandemic.

Our workforce development continues to focus on education and training for high demand jobs – from expanding graduate programs that attracted Amazon to apprenticeships in the exacting skills to construct fail-safe data centers. Notable initiatives include **freezing college tuition increases, expanding Veteran workforce support, and student loan forgiveness for public service jobs in healthcare and teaching**. In addition, joint high school/ community college/ university courses reduce the cost and time for a degree.



We have **tremendous future economic opportunities in green energy**. Hampton Roads is poised to become the center of U.S. off-shore wind manufacturing, with its 55 foot deep, 2-way shipping channel to move massive turbine parts. Good rail access gives coal country sites a competitive advantage for producing storage batteries under the new made-in-America federal tax incentives.

Virginia’s 25<sup>th</sup> lowest corporate tax rate and our push to use COVID economic recovery funds for broadband expansion has put Virginia ahead of surrounding states in making these sites economically viable. Virginia’s economic future is bright – **if we inclusively build the human potential in all individuals** to embrace it.