

VirginiaGrassroots

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Virginia Grassroots Coalition Announces Legislative Priorities for 2020; Commits to Holding Legislators Accountable to Mandate from Voters

At a press conference on January 9, the Virginia Grassroots Coalition made clear it expects legislators to be accountable to the mandate from Virginia voters. Joined by the patrons of key bills, the Coalition highlighted its legislative goals for 2020 (found at <https://www.viriniagrassroots.org>):

- Creating safe and environmentally healthy communities for all Virginians.
- Promoting equity and human rights of all Virginians.
- Investing in our economic future by supporting our students, workers and families.
- Promoting fairness and transparency in our elections and politics.

Coalition Leader, Luisa Boyarski, urged lawmakers to take advantage of this historic mandate. “For too long, issues critical to the lives of Virginians have gone unaddressed by the General Assembly. We cannot allow this year’s historic opportunity go to waste and we are watching to see how our representatives respond.”

Coalition members (representing more than 40 Indivisible, Swing Left, Huddle, Our Revolution, and other grassroots organizations as well as more than 10,000 Virginia voters) formed working groups to review and prioritize legislative bills that must be passed this year.

The Coalition believes climate change is one of the biggest threats to the Commonwealth. It supports bills including **the Virginia Clean Economy Act** and **the Green New Deal** that aggressively move Virginia to a clean economy and zero carbon. To get there, however, Virginia must begin with **campaign finance reform** to remove the corrosive effects money has on the ability of Virginia to enact serious clean energy legislation and ensure meaningful oversight of utilities. Bills introduced by Senator Chap Petersen (SB 25) and Delegate Josh Cole (HB 111) do just that.

Petersen, who has introduced similar bills in the past, stated, “Virginians were clear in the last election that a cleaner and greener climate must be made a reality and the only way to do that is to first pass effective campaign finance reform. That is why, in this new Virginia majority, I will sponsor SB 25, my bill to eliminate donations from publicly-chartered monopolies.” Cole stated, “The election this past November ushered a new era in Virginia’s politics. I’m proud to start that new era with HB 111 which will ensure public utility companies will be held responsible for their actions. It’s time to return power back to the people.”

Gun safety, long a priority of Virginia voters and the Coalition, became more urgent after the tragedy in Virginia Beach. HB 2 takes the first important step to close loopholes on **universal background checks** and firearms transfers. Bill patron, Delegate Kenneth R. Plum, reminds us,

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“We in Virginia have felt the sting of gun violence, all the way back to Virginia Tech. The voters want us to do something about the increasing gun violence, as has been indicated by public polling.”

Paid family and medical leave is paramount if we want a more equitable Commonwealth. Delegate Jennifer Carroll Foy is sponsoring legislation designed to ensure that citizens have the leave they need to care for themselves or family members (HB 825). “Spending time with a dying relative, caring for a sick parent, or bonding with a newborn child should not be a privilege reserved for the wealthiest Virginians. Hardworking, middle class, Virginians, who play by rules, who have done everything right, deserve to spend time with their family like everyone else. I do not know many middle class families who can afford to go without a salary for three months—especially when they are needing to cover the costs of a newborn,” Foy said.

The Coalition looks forward to working with Delegate Kaye Kory and other legislators on a number of key bills on **women’s reproductive rights**. Kory said, “In this session, we will break down the medically-unnecessary barriers to abortions Republicans have erected over the past few decades. Decisions about health care should be between a woman and her doctor. We intend to restore that balance and get the government out of the doctor’s office.”

In a number of commonwealth attorney races across the state, voters showed that they wanted real **reform to our criminal justice system**. Delegate Joseph Lindsey, patron of HB 100, explained, “Virginians rely upon juries to make the most important decisions in our criminal justice system, including determining what sentence is the appropriate punishment in criminal cases. Yet Virginia is the only state in the country that asks jurors to convict people before telling them what sentence they might have to impose—even if that sentence is life in prison. This bizarre rule often causes jurors to feel tricked, and forced to impose sentences they don't think are fair or just. If Virginia is going to trust jurors to convict people, it ought to trust them with the information they need to convict and sentence people fairly, including the range of punishment—before they deliberate.”

The Coalition is deeply committed to **supporting our workers** in Virginia. “Repealing Virginia's so-called 'right-to-work' law is about restoring the rights of working people. According to an Oxfam study, Virginia ranks dead last in the country for workers' rights, but we can help fix this by repealing 'right-to-work.' All Virginians deserve the right to join together in a union and bargain together for better pay, fair benefits, and a decent life,” said Delegate Lee Carter. We urge legislators to support HB 153.

On Monday, January 13, 2020, the Coalition will share with legislators other specific bills it expects the General Assembly to pass to ensure that Virginia is more healthy, safe and equitable for all of its residents.

About the Virginia Grassroots Coalition

The Virginia Grassroots Coalition, formed in April 2017, represents more than 10,000 Virginia voters. Coalition members have been involved in Virginia elections for the past three years. Collectively, we developed a progressive legislative agenda for 2020. As a group of engaged and committed Virginia voters, we are asking the General Assembly to pass bills supporting our agenda.