



VIRGINIA
AFRICAN
AMERICAN
ADVISORY
BOARD

ANNUAL REPORT
2023

Prepared by Members of the African American Advisory Board

TABLE OF CONTENTS

VIRGINIA AFRICAN AMERICAN ADVISORY BOARD3

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR.....6

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY7

SMALL BLACK OWNED BUSINESS.....9

EDUCATION.....13

HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT19

PUBLIC SAFETY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE27

LOOKING FORWARD32

VIRGINIA AFRICAN AMERICAN ADVISORY BOARD

OFFICERS

Dr. Cheryl Ivey Green	Chair , Chesterfield Executive Minister, First Baptist Church of South Richmond
Rev. Cozy Bailey	Vice Chair , Prince William County President, Prince William County Branch NAACP
Hope F. Cupit	Secretary, Chair, Health & the Environment , Bedford, President and CEO Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project, Inc

COMMITTEE CHAIRS

Keren Charles Dongo	Chair, Small Black-Owned Business , Alexandria State Director, United States Senator Tim Kaine
Dr. Ingrid Granberry Grant	Chair, Education , Chesterfield President, Leader Director of school Leadership and Director of Middle School Education, Henrico County Public Schools
Monica L. Reid	Chair, Public Safety and Criminal Justice , Alexandria Director of Advocacy, National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers
Hope F. Cupit	Chair, Health & the Environment , Bedford, President and CEO Southeast Rural Community Assistance project, Inc

MEMBERS

Robert Barnette, Jr.	Hanover, President, Virginia State Conference NAACP; Hanover County Chapter of the NAACP
-----------------------------	--

Eldon Burton	Assistant Vice President for Government Relations, Virginia State University
Dr. Owen Cardwell	Rosel Schewel Distinguished Chair for Education and Human Development, University of Lynchburg; pastor, historic Diamond Hill Baptist Church
Bill Cleveland	Alexandria, Virginia, Former Vice-Mayor, Alexandria
Joseph Chase	Chesapeake, Bishop
Dr. Tamara Wilkerson Dias	Charlottesville, Executive Director, African American Teaching Fellows
Sheila Dixon	Loudoun County, County, CEO Gigology Strategy & Solutions, LLC
Toria Edmonds-Howell	Richmond, Community Engagement Manager, Capital One
Deventae Mooney	Mayor, Town of Coeburn; Assistant Principal, Central High School, Wise County
Clarence Neely	Virginia Beach, Business and Media Consultant
Philomena Desmond-Ogugua	Woodbridge, International Consultant on Trade, Investment, Business Development, Government Relations and Diplomacy
C.J. Sailor	Virginia State Director, Americans for Prosperity
Tia Yancey	Danville, Director of Volunteerism, Averett University's Center for Community Engagement and Career Competitiveness

EX OFFICIO MEMBERS

Caren Merrick	Secretary of Commerce and Trade
Janet Kelly	Secretary of Health and Human Resources
Terry Cole	Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security

Amy Guidera Secretary of Education

Kelly Gee Secretary of the Commonwealth

ADMINISTRATION

Justin Bell, JD Board Legal Counsel, Assistant Attorney General

Emma Jensen Director of Advisory Board Administration

Martin Brown Chief Diversity, Opportunity, and Inclusion Officer

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Governor Youngkin,

The Virginia African American Advisory Board (VAAAB) is pleased to present its 2023 annual report and recommendations. These recommendations reflect a snapshot of some of the immediate needs, concerns opportunities and challenges facing the African American community in Virginia. It is our hope that we might work together to advance our recommendations and develop key action items to strengthen the African American community in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

This report is a compilation of our work over the past year as we seek to ensure that the needs and concerns of the African American community continue to be addressed. Our key focus areas of education, criminal justice and public safety, health, and the environment, as well as small Black owned businesses, reflect what we believe to be the most pressing issues of this time. We continue to seek ways to address racial division and disparities as we seek to ensure equitable access to services and opportunities to aid in bringing resolution to these needs while resolving some of the systemic issues facing African Americans.

Over the past year we engaged in conversation with African American community members and leaders throughout the Commonwealth. We have diligently sought to mine relevant data from state government sources as well as other credible sources as a method of increasing our knowledge and refining our recommendations.

The report outlines those areas we believe are most pressing. We look forward to working together to continue the work that improves the lives of the African American Community and increasing trust in the government. Our four focus areas are:

1. Small Black-Owned Business
2. Health and the Environment
3. Public Safety and Criminal Justice
4. Education

It is our hope that this report will serve as a bridge to not just discussion, but also yield tangible results. We look forward to securing our legacy in this season as the Virginia African American Advisory Board and to working with your administration to advance these recommendations. We have kept in mind the Administration's priorities and see opportunities for us to advance key areas of the report, particularly in the areas of excellence in Education and keeping our communities safe.

We look forward to meeting with you and to doing the work ahead.

Sincerely,

Cozy Bailey, Chairman (2024)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Small Black-Owned Business

Urgent attention is needed to address Black income and wealth. Black income is most often generated through the ingenuity of Black businesses. These recommendations are intended to aid small Black and African American owned businesses so each business can move from the pandemic crisis to thriving. We must ensure every Black and African American business has the opportunity for a future of economic prosperity and wealth transfer to the benefit of all Virginians but especially for the Black and African American community in Virginia:

- **Provide direct support and funding to localities connected to Black businesses.** State and federal resources should flow through localities to current Black owned business with associated accountability measures to evaluate effectiveness.
- **Provide continuing education opportunities in entrepreneurship.** Provide business courses as electives in middle school, high school, and community colleges; create partnerships with civic and nonprofit organizations to augment the public education initiative.
- **Assessing the Commonwealth contracting procedures** to ensure no barriers exist for small Black owned businesses.
- **Conduct a Census of Black Businesses** to create a database useful to state procurement executives and large businesses.

Education

The struggle for equal and quality education for Black children in Virginia can be conceptualized by understanding one piece of history: white school systems in Virginia opted to shut down rather than integrate entirely. The Farmville students' walkout led by Barbara Johns was part of the Brown v. Board of Education ruling that concluded: "separate education facilities were inherently unequal." Understanding Virginia's history on Black children's education will deepen your understanding of why stark divisions and inequalities remain in Black children's education in the Commonwealth of Virginia today. With this in mind, the Education Committee of the African American Advisory Board makes recommendations to the Governor in the following areas, the details of which are provided later in this report:

- Increase the Number of Diverse Educators
- Mental/Behavioral Health Services for Students
- Career Pathways for Educators

Health and the Environment

There are three main recommendations intended to address health and environmental concerns of Virginia’s African American residents, 1) gun violence and its impact on healthy environments, 2) access to quality healthcare, and 3) healthy living environments. The detailed explanations and recommendations are found later in this report.

Public Safety and Criminal Justice

With the continual examples of unarmed Black women and men dying at the hands of police, or dying through gun violence in their community, public safety and criminal justice reform must be addressed holistically and realistically in order to facilitate meaningful and lasting changes. We recommend the following:

1. **Declare gun violence a public health emergency.**
 - a. Community Violence Intervention (CVI) communities suffering from high levels of gun violence need to know about, understand, and strongly consider the (CVI) strategy.
 - b. The Cure Violence (CV) model promising approach to reducing urban gun violence.
 - c. Implement Hospital - Based Violence Intervention
 - d. Require police agencies to conduct a comprehensive yearly report on all guns recovered.
2. **Examine the pretrial system to ensure that people are not subjected to unnecessary and costly pretrial detention.**
3. **Support and encourage policies that implement counsel at first appearance (CAFA) in jurisdictions across the Commonwealth.**
4. **Revise Virginia's pretrial system to ensure that its citizens are not subject to unnecessary cost during pretrial detention, including supporting and funding policies that implement counsel at first appearance.**

COMMITTEE REPORTS

SMALL BLACK-OWNED BUSINESS

Black and African American small business owners endured a lot in 2021 and challenges continued into 2022. Like many Virginians, small Black owned businesses endured payroll challenges, lost revenue and employee and client retention challenges brought on by the international pandemic, and these challenges continued into 2022. At every turn Black and African American business owners found a way to survive. Not all the challenges faced by Black business owners are directly attributed to the pandemic. A Black Enterprise report in February 2022 stated that during the period February 2020 to August 2021, the Commonwealth of Virginia emerged as having the greatest potential for supporting the growth of Black businesses. Notably, this report credits the efforts of local government private initiatives as main drivers coupled with a relatively high percentage of Black entrepreneurs. While the report, conducted by Merchant Maverick, determined that Virginia has high potential for the success of Black businesses, it also reiterates that Black owned businesses face major inequities when it comes to payroll. The national average annual payroll for employer businesses is \$1.25 million ---over four times the \$301K in payroll Black-run employer businesses average per year. The previously mentioned funding gap almost certainly plays a role here. Earlier research by the Stanford Institute shows that White-owned businesses receive an average of \$18,500 in outside equity at founding, compared to just \$500 for Black-owned businesses. Already starting at a disadvantage, Black businesses face hurdles while attempting to catch up down the stretch.

There is a strong correlation between Black owned businesses and Black wealth. According to a 2019 survey of Consumer Finance “the median net worth of Black households was \$24,000 as opposed to \$189,000 for white households. This shortfall in financial wealth creates a cascade of inequalities in education, homeownership, and simply saving for emergencies. And while it will take multiple solutions to solve these enormous problems, entrepreneurship can provide the best

opportunity to build sustainable, long-term wealth”.¹ Most surveys show that the “wealth gap” has widened during the pandemic, creating even greater financial and economic pressures on people of color.

Black and African American businesses are often birthed from necessity. These businesses tend to be pillars in Black and African American communities bringing resources, but also adding culture considerations. Yet Black and African American small business owners continue to face dire consequences from historical systematic inequities compounded by COVID-19.

Given this history it has become even more imperative that in 2022 and beyond, supporting Black business owners and their contributions to the Virginia economy should not be limited to sympathetic words but must extend to essential change in policy and economic resource abutment so those words can turn into measurable action.

It is with this backdrop as context that the small Black owned business committee of the Virginia African American Advisory Board offers reiterates recommendations made during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the last year VAAAB again met with local Black Chambers of Commerce in each region in the Commonwealth. Additionally, the committee took time to meet with individual Black businesses to assess resources, information, and present-day challenges. The committee also conducted a “Black Table Talk” consisting of a panel of renowned African American business owners in the Commonwealth discussing the various challenges and solutions to increasing the success of small Black owned businesses in the commonwealth. The recommendations presented here are the same this board made in 2021 and stem from the enduring challenges of small Black owned businesses revealed through conversations, meetings, and research.

¹[black-entrepreneurship/?sh=eb627be5bec4](#)

Recommendations:

- **Provide direct support to localities connected to Black businesses AND set up accountability measures as a condition to the financial resources.**
 - Black and African American businesses reported that they mostly accessed information and resources through their local connections. This includes the local county and city government, as well as local banks and civic organizations. During COVID-19, businesses relied on the local county and city government for financial resources and support. It's important that as a local government is receiving funding from the State, they demonstrate how those funds were used and by whom. Data collection can help mitigate inequities. There should be clear documentation of how many and what kind of businesses were supported during COVID-19, including demographic information.
 - When funds are dispersed to county and city governments the Governor's office should inform each of the regional Black Chambers of commerce. Many times, by the time Black and African Americans businesses learn about new funding, the funding has already been depleted.

- **Provide continuing education opportunities in entrepreneurship**
 - Provide free business courses in middle and high school and community college
 - Set aside financial resources for civic and nonprofit organizations to conduct business classes in the communities they serve.

- **Assessing the Commonwealth contracting procedures**
 - Review the process for awarding state contracts and determine the challenges that small Black owned businesses face in being awarded contracts.
 - Provide clear directives, oversight, and enforcement to government agencies to ensure that small Black owned businesses are not being prevented from contract awards.

- **Conduct a Census of Black Businesses**
 - The State Government should know how many Black Businesses are operating within Virginia.

Too often in Black history we are commemorating and remembering what was lost, what was taken, and what was destroyed. Today we have an opportunity to put in place policies, backed by financial support, which will ensure Black and African American businesses in Virginia survive and thrive so that Virginians 100 years from now are not commemorating a tragic past but instead celebrating and building on our legacy of abundance and abundance.

EDUCATION

Virginia has a long, torrid history as it pertains to educating Black children. Slaves in Virginia were prohibited by law and practice from learning to read or write. Even when Virginia established a free public education system, educating Black children was a complete afterthought. In 1896 the Supreme Court upheld "separate but equal doctrine" in the landmark case of Plessy v. Ferguson. However, Plessy v. Ferguson reinforced the separate and ignored the equality pertaining to education in practice. Black schools were widely underfunded by every measure - from the lack of quality buildings to the scarcity and, in many cases, complete lack of books and the lack of a livable compensation for Black teachers. Unfortunately for many African- American children in Virginia, many of these measures remain unequal today.

The struggle for equal and quality education for Black children in Virginia can be conceptualized by understanding one piece of history: white school systems in Virginia opted to shut down rather than integrate entirely. The Farmville students' walkout led by Barbara Johns was part of the Brown v. Board of Education ruling that concluded: "separate education facilities were inherently unequal." Understanding Virginia's history on Black children's education will deepen your understanding of why stark divisions and inequalities remain in Black children's education in the Commonwealth of Virginia today. 16 With this in mind, the Education Committee of the African American Advisory Board makes the following recommendations to the Governor:

Increase the Number of Diverse Educators

According to Allegretto and Mishel (2020), The Economic Policy Institute ranked Virginia as last in the country in terms of the "teacher wage penalty," a measure referring to the gap in weekly salaries between teachers and other college-educated professionals. Unfortunately, Virginia's wage penalty is 32.7% which doesn't allow them to have the same quality of life as other college-educated professionals in the state. Post-COVID, our schools are more vulnerable than ever, and the need for highly qualified teachers to meet the widening achievement gaps of students is more daunting than ever. There has been a concerted effort over the past two years to improve teacher salaries; however, Virginia still ranks below other states impacting the recruitment and retention of teachers.

As a state, we must increase the percentage of minorities and male educators. Unfortunately, our schools lack teachers with diverse backgrounds to cater to our diverse student population. For

example, 40% of public-school students are African American, yet less than 15% of educators are Black or Latino. Children from diverse backgrounds benefit from educators who can affirm and share their identity. In addition, all educators must be culturally sensitive to their students to ensure academic, social, and emotional needs are met.

According to the U.S. Department of Education: African American students are 2.9 times more likely to be labeled as a student with mental disabilities and 1.9 times as likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed. Black males also make up 2% of K-12 public school teachers. With this information, the Education Committee recommends the following:

- Tuition Assistance/ HBCU
- Increase assistance for teacher PREP for all Colleges
- Student Loan Assistance
- Praxis Preparation
- Quality of Life Resources, i.e., housing, continuing education

Mental/Behavioral Health

Mental/Behavioral Health is critical to children's success in school and life. Research demonstrates that students who receive social-emotional and mental health support achieve better academically. The pandemic itself has caused much worry, stress, and grief. As schools return to school, there is an increased need for additional mental health resources in our PK-12 schools and colleges/universities.

- Lack of community resources for low-income students (that are available outside instruction, ex: during a crisis)
- Supporting higher education by administering a code of conduct holding students accountable for their actions

In 2021, Virginia's Community Colleges (VCCS) Board identified student mental health challenges as barriers to students successfully earning a workforce credential or completing a degree. To address this issue, the system entered into a contract with a tele-mental health provider. In the first six months of implementation at 18 of Virginia's community colleges:

-
- VCCS students made 10,530 Timely Care.com website page views.
 - 3,424 VCCS students registered for services by creating accounts on the Timely Care site
 - VCCS students made 2,381 total care visits
 - 716 interactions with professional health care coordinators
 - 80 Virginia Community College students participated in group counseling sessions

We have heard from students thanking college administrators for providing these life-changing services. Unfortunately, under the current funding model, providing these services to students may not be sustainable. Colleges have procured these services using pandemic relief funding which expires in the coming months. Without state support, community colleges may be unable to continue supporting their students' mental health needs.

To better prepare faculty, staff, and administrators to meet student needs, almost 2,000 VCCS faculty, staff, and administrators have completed Trauma Informed Training. This training helps ensure that students' physical and emotional safety are addressed as the colleges build an environment that promotes a holistic approach to student support services and provides a culture of care for students. Providing funding to expand this professional development opportunity to K-12 and all postsecondary educational institutional partners would significantly impact student outcomes. With this information, the Education Committee recommends the following:

Cultural Competency:

- At least 50% of providers and case management staff represent cultural, ethnic, and sexual orientation backgrounds reflective of the student population they serve.
- At least 30% of providers and case management staff speak a language other than English and have appropriate language/interpretation services.
- Providers and Case Managers are evaluated on cultural competency at the time of hiring and periodically throughout their tenure.
- Providers and Case Managers are trained regularly to improve family engagement and service delivery strategies to increase access and equity.
- Provide opportunities for district partners and families to provide feedback and evaluate the Provider's and organization's cultural competence.

Network of Supports that are replicable and qualified to deliver services:

-
- Ensure existing and new providers don't duplicate services to fill gaps within existing networks.
 - Ensure community organizations and/or districts innovate short-term models and/or screening protocols to connect families to existing long-term service providers as waitlists are exhausted.
 - Accessing care should be student-focused and minimize the number of times families and students must re-share their experiences and trauma.
 - Outside service providers and/or district staff should provide trauma-informed care.
 - Outside service providers should be evaluated for their trauma-informed care experience.
 - Outside service providers and/or district staff should be regularly trained and mentored to improve the delivery of trauma-informed care.

Suspension Rates for Marginalized Groups - Restorative Practices:

- Suspended students should have access to mental health services with the goal of returning to in-person learning ASAP.
- Reduction in suspension rates among students accessing services.
- According to the Association for Children's Mental Health, nationally, only 40% of students with emotional, behavioral, and mental health disorders graduate from high school, compared to the national average of 76%. In addition, over 50% of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities ages fourteen and older drop out of high school. This is the highest dropout rate of any disability group. Therefore, schools should have systems of wrap-around services, specifically mental health support, which allow for identifying root causes for intervention and prevention services aligned with restorative practices where possible.

Family Engagement (Repository of service providers for families in person and virtual)

- Data shows that 39% of adults feel comfortable talking to their child's school about their child's mental health needs, while 64% feel comfortable speaking to their child's doctor or health care provider.
- Making services available during school hours ensures working parents do not miss work to give their children access to care.
- Districts and service providers communicate materials and participate in family engagement events.

-
- Service providers will make access to care seamless, with virtual options and flexible hours for scheduling

Health and Safety for Employees

- Service providers could ensure that students have timely access to support to ensuring less disruption to the learning environment. Also, provide an outlet for mental health concerns, specifically those aligned with anger and the effects of adverse childhood experiences or conditions that are likely to manifest in the school setting.
- Supporting students with known/suspected mental health or emotional health needs is trying on school staff, knowing that there are readily accessible, scalable resources to support the wellbeing of staff and students.
- Data suggests that 53% of parents miss one day of work every month for the mental health needs of their children; citing the volume of parents among school staff, having a resource to serve students alleviates employee absences among those who are parents or caregivers.
- Additional financial support for districts to implement a comprehensive mental health plan within their district.

Career Pathways

African Americans disproportionately fill vulnerable jobs and make less. There is a need to invest in job training and education for displaced and vulnerable workers. Also, creating an entry-level jobs workforce to take jobs in sectors that can sustain an inevitable economic downturn. According to the Census Bureau, 32.5% of the twenty-five and older population has a bachelor's degree or more, compared to only 22.5% of African Americans. In addition, 55.6% of African Americans in the labor force are underemployed or working jobs that do not require their degree. The following recommendations are needed to improve the quality of life for African Americans in the Commonwealth.

- Career and Technical Education (CTE) - Create high-quality K-12 education with career training that leads to career pathways that build a resilient middle class.
- Workforce Development/Credentialing will allow access to educational or credentialing opportunities, on-the-job training, and removing barriers such as transportation and childcare.

-
- Provide grant funding to schools and community organizations for internships, experiential learning opportunities, career counseling, and other activities that impact integrating their education and career preparation.

Virginia's Community Colleges are currently partnering with VDOE, and K-12 school districts to provide additional career pathways for high school seniors. Using existing G3 pathways in career areas of health, public safety, manufacturing, childcare, and technology, high school seniors who meet eligibility requirements may earn a workforce credential at a fraction (about 1/3) of the cost. However, additional funding is needed to provide financial aid so financially disadvantaged students can access these family-sustaining wage-earning opportunities.

We hope these recommendations will serve as a bridge to close the disparities gap and serve as a propeller to catapult African American children into the 21st century with economic security and the opportunities to create wealth. However, even with all the education opportunities, the efficacy is significantly weakened if the Black community's health gaps are not addressed.

1. <http://www.acmh-mi.org/get-help/navigating/problems-at-school/>
2. <https://www.onoursleeves.org/about/research/workplace>
3. [Virginia's teacher shortage is fueling big spending on recruitment and retention - Virginia Mercury](#)

HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Gun Violence is a Public Health Crisis

Efforts to address gun violence can take various forms, including advocacy for stricter gun control laws, community-based violence prevention programs, educational initiatives, and outreach to at-risk individuals. Mothers and other community members can play a crucial role in raising awareness about the issue and advocating for change. In one such community, Danville, Virginia, local law enforcement has shown that engagement and partnership with the community are a large part of the model of crime reduction's success in reducing and solving crime since 2018. Local law enforcement cannot do this alone. For example, Mothers Stronger Together, an organization with the mission to help other mothers who have lost children to gun violence, works in the Danville community to help reduce gun violence by uniting the youth. Danville has reduced gun violence deaths by nearly 50%; the death toll from 2016-2018 was over 13% before the initiatives started in 2018, and the death toll was reduced to 6% after 2018.

Firearm violence is a serious public health problem that impacts the health and safety of Americans. Gaps remain in our knowledge about the and ways to prevent it. Addressing these gaps is a step toward keeping individuals, families, schools, and communities safe from firearm violence and its consequences. ^[1] In 2020, firearm-related injuries were among the leading causes of death for people ages 1-44 in the United States.

With thousands of gun-related injuries and deaths, it's impossible to overlook that gun violence has become a public health crisis. In 2016, the American Medical Association declared its status based on over 20 years of continued gun violence as a cause of death in the United States. It offered recommendations for reducing these instances, yet little has changed when it comes to improving gun safety and preventing accidents and attacks like the Sandy Hook and Uvalde shootings, each of which had over twenty deaths. Tackling the gun violence epidemic involves a multifaceted approach that includes awareness and addressing the root causes that promote the prevention of gun-related death and trauma.

The Impact of Gun Violence

The United States saw 45,222 gun-related deaths in 2020. The prevalence of gun violence varies between states, in part due to varied gun laws, and disproportionately affects racial and cultural minorities. In Virginia, 82% of firearm homicide victims are male and Black males are disproportionately impacted. Black males aged 15-34 have a firearm homicide rate nearly sixteen times higher than White (non-Latino) males of the same age group. ¹¹¹

Mental Health and Gun Violence

Gun violence is a mental health issue. Often, those who struggle with their mental health are the victims and others affected by gun violence, not necessarily just the shooters. Framing all shooters as mentally ill paints people who do live with mental illness as violent when the vast majority of those people have no violent tendencies. Mental health conditions do not inherently make someone dangerous, and racism is not a mental illness. Mental illness is a consequence of, not a catalyst for, gun violence.

Research shows higher rates of mental health distress among racial minority groups, as they are more affected and targeted by gun violence. These targeted attacks create fear within the community, as shooters often target places most people consider safe, such as schools, places of worship, community gathering spots, and even homes, including in cases of domestic violence. As a result, people who are part of these groups suffer consequences in the form of mental health conditions.

When it comes to mental health, gun violence becomes a critical and relevant component as a public health issue, and because few people receive the resources necessary to manage or recover from conditions caused by the problem of gun violence. In the United States, minimal acknowledgment and resources exist for people impacted by gun violence. Therefore, it is essential to approach gun violence from multiple angles to address it as a public health issue, as it remains an epidemic in the United States.

Approaching Gun Violence as a Public Health Issue

Gun violence is considered an epidemic because of how widely it has affected people in the

United States. It reaches beyond the people directly affected and creates a need for active shooter drills due to a lack of prevention. Addressing gun violence as a public health issue requires a process that includes several steps.

First, experts must collect reliable data about firearms that includes when and where shootings happen, the demographics affected, and the types of gun violence committed. Next, they must identify various risk factors and how to mitigate them, which include access to guns, violent histories, community factors, and gun policies in different areas. Using those factors, we then implement prevention strategies, such as pushing for legislation that reduces risk factors, identifying and addressing behavioral risk factors, background checks, tracking firearms sales, and community-level training with de-escalation.

Above all, any public health measures taken against gun violence must be universal. We can't resolve a public health crisis without everyone on the same page. A widespread understanding of how gun violence impacts people, its signs, and its consequences is only the beginning of resolving this issue. [2] The Commonwealth should consider providing resources for mental health facilities to help combat gun violence issues.

Access to Quality Health Care

Health disparities in the African American community have been linked to longevity and quality of life. One example of this is the well-established fact^[3] of Black women in Virginia being more than twice as likely to die from a pregnancy-related death than White women. While the Health and Environment Committee commends the Governor for recognizing these disparities and identifying "closing gaps in maternal mortality as a central objective for his administration, pledging to expand access to care," the Committee also recognizes that specific policy measures have yet to be outlined to expand this access to health equity for all Virginians.

Another example of health disparities relates to the lack of access to COVID vaccines and the high rate of COVID related deaths that continued to shine light on inequities in health care. The African American community continues to face high rates of death due to strokes, high blood pressure, cancer, and other health concerns. The longevity and quality of life for African Americans will depend on access to quality healthcare, as well as environmental needs such as transportation and secure housing.

The Healthcare and Environment Committee seeks to continue its work to educate the African American community on how to improve healthcare access to services despite known disparities. The African American community is less likely to receive preventive health services and often receives lower-quality care. African Americans also have the worst health outcomes due to lack of early detection for various conditions which include heart disease, obesity and the threat of contracting COVID.

African Americans struggle with chronic and complex diseases like obesity at a higher rate in the nation and in Virginia.^{6 7} In the Commonwealth, African Americans have the highest rates of several chronic diseases, such as heart disease, asthma^{8 9 10}, and diabetes,¹⁰ both exacerbated by obesity.

Early detection and intervention of chronic health issues can save African Americans' lives, as in the example of asthma where studies suggest "delayed identification of childhood asthma results in an increased risk of long-term and various morbidities compared to those with timely diagnosis and intervention. "Factors that can inhibit early detection and treatment include were African.

Americans live (urban and rural) ^[4], housing conditions, ^[5] and transportation access. The health and Environment Committee asks that the Governor keep in full consideration, when striving to help solve this problem of disparities, the hand-in-hand role racism as a public health crisis plays in these inequities. And, finally, with regard to maternal well-being, the Health and Environment Committee wants assurances that the previous administration's advancements on maternal health, set forth in the April 2021 Maternal Health Strategic Plan published by the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, be consulted (and improved upon where needed) as its agenda to fully address disparities in maternal health and infant mortality by 2025 has already had some early successes, and precious lives can be saved in the timeliness of building on this work.

In considering a factor like transportation access, we need to look no further than the example of Hampton Roads, the second largest metro area in Virginia, and Hampton Roads Transit (HRT), the largest transit system in Virginia, not counting the Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority (WMATA). As of 2016, African Americans made up 74% of the overall HRT ridership and a whopping 79% of the bus ridership. Thus, any cuts in funding for public

transit, for example, suspension of the gas tax,¹⁵ could negatively impact African American citizens' transportation access to doctor appointments. It also will hinder related healthcare services, including paratransit for seniors and the disabled. Anecdotally, a member of this Committee took public transportation via HRT to all of her prenatal care visits for the entirety of her first pregnancy. Without this option, at that time, she would have had no other affordable way to these appointments, which were especially critical to her maternal health as she was struggling with a high-risk pregnancy.

Health and the Environment

Healthy living environments are key to longevity of life in the African American community.

Green spaces have been determined to make people healthier and happier. Years of environmental injustice have left many African Americans and other people of color without access to healthy green space, living in environments where industrial and hazardous facilities are housed.

Environmental data reflects that low-income and minority communities are disproportionately exposed to environmental contamination. Several studies have been conducted that analyze the spatial distribution of environmentally hazardous facilities and found facilities concentrated in or near communities of color and poor communities. Researchers have found a statistically significant connection between environmental exposure and socioeconomic class as well as racial compositions in recent years.

The Environmental Justice Act of 2020, introduced by Senator Ghazala Lakshmi (SB406) and Delegate Mark Keam (HB704), established that the policy of the Commonwealth is to promote environmental justice as defined in the bill, and to ensure that environmental justice is carried out throughout the Commonwealth. It defines environmental justice as . the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of every person, regardless of race, color, national origin, income, faith, or disability, regarding the development, implementation, or enforcement of any environmental law, regulation, or policy."11

We are encouraged by the actions of the 2020 General Assembly and the Department of Environmental Quality's (DEQ) commitment to environmental justice establishing the Environmental

Justice Act which established DEQ's statement of policy, and a commitment fulfill DEQ's environmental responsibilities. DEQ states: Success in advancing environmental justice through DEQ's activities does not simply involve "checking boxes," but putting a process in place to build trust, share understanding, and align values among community members, stakeholders, local, state and federal government, industry partners and DEQ staff The ultimate goal is to create greater equity and justice for all Virginians. The Health and Environment Committee would like to see the recommendations of the October 2020 Environmental Justice Study for the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality advanced.

Recommendations Overview: ^[6]

The report's recommendations reflect the varying levels of authority and agency that will be required to significantly advance environmental justice across the Commonwealth. It is important to note that many of the recommendations are within DEQ's authority to implement, however, others, particularly those relating to strengthening, clarifying and/or adding authority and resources (both staffing and monetary) require action by the General Assembly and the Governor. In these instances, the recommendations highlight necessary support from the General Assembly and the Governor. The recommendations are organized into nine goals based on operational areas, as follows:

1. Authority: Strengthen and clarify legal and statutory authority to integrate environmental justice into DEQ programs.
2. Leadership: Foster subject matter understanding and cohesive support for environmental justice among DEQ leadership.
3. Staff Capacity: Increase staff clarity and capacity to effectively support environmental justice and apply environmental justice considerations throughout DEQ programs.
4. Guidance and Tools: Provide guidance and tools to ensure clear and consistent implementation of adopted environmental justice policies and practices.
5. Accessible Information: Develop tools to provide more transparent, accessible and real-time environmental information to the public.
6. Relationship Building: Invest in proactively building productive relationships with

environmental justice and other adversely impacted communities.

7. **Community Engagement:** Proactively and authentically engage communities on issues and decision-making that could potentially affect their health and quality of life.
8. **Environmental Justice Community Capacity:** Build the capacity of environmental justice communities to participate meaningfully in environmental decision-making.
9. **Local Government Coordination:** Invest in local government coordination and education to ensure alignment with environmental justice policies.

The Health and Environment Committee would like to see the efforts of the Secretary of Natural Resources, DEQ, and the Virginia Council on Environmental Justice combine efforts to develop a centralized list of communities impacted in the African American Community. This list can be combined with other communities of color and housed in a central repository that would be used to track and provide updates on the status of resolution.

The Health and Environment Committee Recommends:

1. The Commonwealth's strategic planning centers around ensuring Access to Quality Health Care for all Virginians including a key focus on transportation, housing, maternal health, heart disease, and obesity as it relates to the African American Community. The goal is to have solid results by 2026.
2. The Commonwealth collects reliable data about firearms that includes when and where shootings happen, the demographics affected, and the types of gun violence committed. In addition, the committee recommends identifying risk factors and how to mitigate them, including access to guns, violent histories, community factors, and gun policies in different areas. Using this information, implement prevention strategies such as legislation that aids in reducing risks, identifying and addressing behavioral risk factors, background checks, tracking firearms sales, and community-level training with de-escalation. Incorporate the

CDC's four-step guideline using the public health approach to address gun violence across the commonwealth.

3. Utilize Community Action Agencies to use the Whole Family approach model to reduce gun violence in the community and restore a sense of community among African Americans.

APPENDICES

[1] <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/firearms/index.html>

[2] <https://nphic.org/blog/885-is-gun-violence-a-public-health-crisis>

[3] <https://www.virginiamercurv.com/V2021/04/20/taking-steps-to-cut-maternal-mortality-in-vir2inia/>

[4] <https://20hrt.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2016-OD-Final-Report.pdf>

[5] <https://gohrt.com/2022/06/transit-fundil12/>

[6] Environmental Justice Study for the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality

[7] https://godanriver.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/as-gun-crimes-rise-in-city-danville-police-department-uses-engagement-partnership-with-community/article_f38e1cf6-0f93-11ee-a489-93cf4c7b979b.html

[8] <https://wset.com/news/local/group-of-danville-mothers-who-lost-children-to-gun-violence-strive-to-bring-awareness>

PUBLIC SAFETY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

The Public Safety & Criminal Justice Committee strategically addresses safety concerns based on data, which impede quality of life and adversely impact healthy socialization in African American communities. The committee will also examine public safety and criminal justice practices that perpetuate generational poverty, unhealthy neighborhoods, and inevitable incarceration in African American communities. In addition, it will explore and analyze public policies that inadvertently perpetuate violent crime and economic disparity in African American communities.

Declaring Gun Violence, a Public Health Emergency

Gun violence is not just about crime suppression or enforcement, it is also about prevention, intervention, and reentry. One of our chief concerns is gun violence and its impact in the African American community. Since 2011, at least 100,000 people have died due to gun violence in our Black and Brown communities which has largely gone unnoticed. In Virginia, 82% of firearm homicide victims are male and African American males are disproportionately impacted. African Americans males aged 15-34 have a firearm homicide rate nearly sixteen times higher than White (non-Latino) males of the same age group.

Strategies likely will involve traditional police enforcement and crime prevention activities through a **multipronged and multi-disciplinary strategy** to include police to address the underlying problems that facilitate gun violence.

- **Recommendation #1:** Community Violence Intervention (CVI) communities suffering from high levels of gun violence need to know about, understand, and strongly consider the (CVI) strategy. Violence interrupters are a community-based strategy that helps to resolve conflicts, spread the retail deterrence message, and serve as street-level conduits to social services.
- **Recommendation #2:** The Cure Violence (CV) model promising approach to reducing urban gun violence. CV is rooted in the theory that violence is a behavior pattern that acts like a contagious disease transmitted from person to person via rivalry and social conditions. A key principle of CV is that, by targeting the individuals most at risk for driving or becoming the victims of violence, it is possible to interrupt and slow the spread of violence within the “infected” community. “Under this framework, America’s poor, inner-city neighborhoods are

the epicenters of the gun violence epidemic Underserved, predominantly urban African American and Hispanic areas are plagued by a massively disproportionate share of violence.

- **Recommendation #3:** Hospital - Based Violence Intervention. A strategy that focuses on gun violence and high-risk individuals who have been recently admitted to a hospital for treatment of a serious violent injury due to gun violence. This strategy, referred to as Hospital-based Violence Intervention (HVIP), is built upon the premise that the strongest risk factor for violent injury is a history of previous violent injury. In fact, being the victim of violence also significantly increases the chances of a person becoming a perpetrator of violence.
- **Recommendation #4:** Require police agencies to conduct a comprehensive yearly report on all guns recovered. The Norfolk Model: The Norfolk Police Department (NPD) is in its sixth year of tracking the history of guns that have been recovered by the NPD. These guns have either been found or used in the commission of a crime. This intensive research effort has been put forth to better understand how firearms are found in the hands of criminals despite the state and federal laws in place that are meant to control the flow of weapons into the hands of criminals. Almost every gun in this country is legally purchased through a federally licensed firearm dealer. Data reveals that the crime that has occurred with that firearm in most cases was not committed by the lawful purchaser. It is only through analyzing evidence such as this data that we can make informed decisions that will have the greatest impact on violent crime in our neighborhoods.

Pretrial Justice

Recommendation #1: Call for Virginia to continue to examine its pretrial system to ensure that people are not subjected to unnecessary and costly pretrial detention.

Racial disparities are prevalent in the criminal legal system, including the disproportionate number of persons of color who are detained pretrial. Persons of color disproportionately receive higher bails and more burdensome release conditions compared to their white counterparts.^{iv}

In Virginia, 45 percent of the local and regional jail populations is comprised of people who are presumed to be innocent. And despite comprising only 20 percent of the state's population, Black Virginians make up 43 percent of the people in the state's jails, reflecting an overrepresentation in its

pretrial detention population. As detailed in the Virginia State Crime Commission’s final report on the Virginia Pretrial Data Project,^{iv} Black individuals were significantly overrepresented in their pretrial cohort, constituting 40 percent of the cohort population.^{iv}

Proactive steps must be taken to address these disparities on a systemic level. Beyond the incarceration costs, there are substantial harms that are inflicted with any pretrial detention. Research shows that those released within the first 24 hours following their detention are more likely to have their case dismissed or have a deferred adjudication.^{iv} Pretrial release is also associated with lower likelihood of being sentenced to incarceration if convicted and receiving a shorter sentence when they are incarcerated.

Being detained more than 24 hours can often mean losing employment and housing; disruption of medical care, mental health services, and medication; and serious damage to family and community relationships.^{iv} Additionally, even brief periods of pretrial detention have significant adverse impacts on factors that impact the operations of the legal system. Compared with their peers who are detained, those released within the first 24 hours are less likely to miss a court appearance or to be arrested for a new criminal charge while awaiting disposition or in the 2 years following the conclusion of their case.^{iv}

Legislation adopted during the 2021 General Assembly session mandates the collection of a specific set of data on individuals held pretrial in Virginia and requires the data to be made publicly available. With the passage of this legislation, Virginia now has a continuous, sustained data collection process, allowing for the examination of demographics related to race, ethnicity, gender, and age disparities, pretrial detention and other data related to pretrial outcomes.

With this victory, Virginia will need to remain vigilant and continue to examine its pretrial system to ensure that individuals are not being subjected to unnecessary and costly pretrial detention and correct for any possible disparities that the data may show.

The legislation adopted, as well as the continued examination of Virginia’s pretrial system is a priority issue of a coalition of state and national organizations under the banner of the Virginia Pretrial Justice Coalition (VPJC).^{iv}

Recommendation #2: Support and encourage policies that implement counsel at first appearance (CAFA) in jurisdictions across the Commonwealth. This can include supporting legislative proposals, as well as, appropriating needed financial resources to ensure successful implementation.

As cited in “The Role of Defense Counsel in Ensuring a Fair Justice System,” the author states:

“It is at the first arraignment of the defendant that a vigorous defense counsel is needed for the justice system to be a fair one. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that the defendant who is released on bail ends up with a better ultimate disposition than one who does not. The freed defendant is at a better bargaining position regarding plea negotiations, is able to enter a rehab program and have counselors report to the court about his progress, is able to locate witnesses, and is available to meet with and assist counsel in preparing the case for a hearing or trial.”^{iv}

While there is a need for counsel at every stage of the process, none may be more critical than the first days following an arrest. Data-driven studies repeatedly demonstrate the benefits of providing CAFA.^{iv} The presence of counsel at this initial court proceeding improves outcomes for accused individuals, the legal system, and the community.^{iv} As well, providing a meaningful defense voice in the early moments of a case can help mitigate the disproportionate impact of the criminal legal system on communities of color, who are overrepresented in pretrial detention.^{iv}

In Virginia arrested individuals^{iv} are not guaranteed to have an attorney at their initial appearance or to have the court consider bail at that stage. The state’s law requires those detained be brought before the court on the “first day on which such court sits after the person is charged.”^{iv} Larger jurisdictions may conduct these initial hearings daily, but in small, rural communities a person may wait a week or more for an initial appearance and then wait additional time for an attorney to be assigned, to meet with the lawyer, for a bond motion to be filed, and to have that motion docketed and heard. There is no statutory time limit for conducting an initial appearance or assigning counsel.^{iv}

The state currently has no uniform method for providing pretrial representation. Not every jurisdiction is served by a public defender’s office,^{iv} some jurisdictions provide CAFA regularly, others sporadically, and most do not provide it at all. Similarly, variation exists regarding when issues of bail

are addressed substantively for the first time. As a result, statewide action can positively impact thousands of individuals.

Each year from 2020, the Virginia General Assembly has considered legislation that would encourage providing CAFA statewide in Virginia. The legislative proposals would have:

- Guaranteed every person who is not free on bail be brought before a judge on the first day of such court sites after the person is detained.
- Guaranteed every person in custody have a lawyer to assist them during their first court appearance.
- Provided the lawyer have access to the information needed for effective pretrial advocacy.
- Ensured an individual and their lawyer have adequate time to communicate in confidence before appearing in court.
- Required courts to allow a meaningful bond hearing to take place on the same day as the initial appearance.

The proposals also called for each jurisdiction to form a committee with a broad array of stakeholders to design a plan for implementation that reflects the needs, resources, staffing and practices of that locality.

The legislative proposals have been supported and championed by a coalition of state and national organizations under the banner of the Virginia Pretrial Justice Coalition (VPJC). The 2022 legislation, SB 475, received bipartisan support in the State Senate.

LOOKING FORWARD

Going forward the Virginia African American Advisory Board would like to address the following:

- Housing, given the current challenges with affordable housing, increased mortgage rates and record rental increases.
- Equity in resources for Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the Commonwealth.
- Ensuring current voting rights are secured.