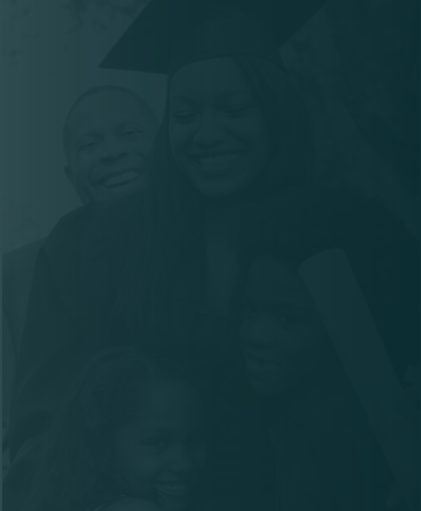
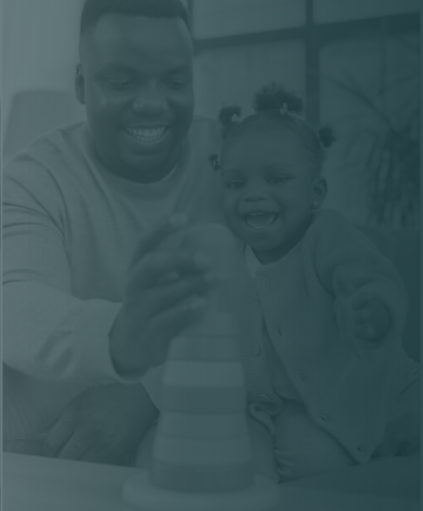




Collective Agenda

FOR VIRGINIA'S FUTURE



The Commonwealth Institute

The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis advances racial and economic justice in Virginia by advocating for public policies that are designed in partnership with people most impacted, and shaped by credible, accessible fiscal and policy research.

Visit www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org for more information.

July 2024

The People's Agenda

In the critical conversations about Virginia's future — what issues to prioritize, what real solutions look like, and who should have the power to decide such questions — the exclusion of communities of color and those directly impacted remains the norm.

That's why racial equity and economic justice is the driving force of our work and is at the center of what we aim to accomplish year after year: championing and shepherding new laws and policies so that everyone in Virginia can thrive, no exceptions.

This "Collective Agenda" draws from our expertise in policy and data analysis, coalition building, and — most importantly — conversations with community leaders and trusted partners to envision a future where everyone in Virginia has the resources they need to thrive and to spotlight specific state policy solutions that will help get us there. We know there is significant work left to do beyond what is included in the following pages, but we hope this can be a solid foundation to inspire readers to take action in whatever capacity they can.

- Team TCI

We Dream of a Virginia with...

Greater Economic Opportunity 4

We are the economy, and our economy will only do well when we have the resources to thrive, such as strong wages, safe housing, and the ability to care for our children.

Great Public Schools for Every Student 14

Public schools are foundational to thriving communities. Together, we must make sure that every student in every zip code has access to a high-quality public education.

Safe and Healthy Communities 10

For our families to be healthy and our communities whole, we must remove barriers to good health and invest in the programs and services prioritized by our communities.

A Fair Tax Code & Ample Resources 16

By fixing our upside-down tax code, we can make sure those who have profited from our current system pay their fair share, and together, we can achieve our shared goals.



We dream of a Virginia with...

Greater Economic Opportunity

No matter what we look like, where we come from, or what we do for a living, most of us want a good life for our families, dignity for our elders, and our kids to have the love, care and opportunities they need to pursue their dreams. We can build on our recent accomplishments to advance policies that create greater economic opportunity and allow families to thrive.



Together, we can...

Build an Economy That Works for All of Us

The U.S. economy is improving, with more people finding good jobs, yet since early 2021 big corporations have raised prices faster than our wages, and too many of our neighbors are barely staying afloat. Many of our most essential workers who care for our young children, help seniors live with dignity, pick our Virginia apples, and prepare our food at restaurants are paid unlivable wages and have no access to paid sick or family leave, vacation time, or affordable child care for their own children. And many families can't afford to live in communities of opportunity with access to high-quality public schools. Policies set up almost a century ago to exclude many Black workers from basic protections like the minimum wage are still harming many working people of color today.



Virginia's vast yet untapped people-powered sector persists despite being systemically excluded for generations and represents the heart and soul of what makes Virginia business so diverse and unique. We must develop new pathways for historically marginalized Virginians to level up with a new set of strategic power tools developed especially for all those on the front lines of the struggle.

- Free B. | Untold RVA | Richmond

Big corporations have manipulated the system to get away with squeezing small businesses and their own workers by way of unfair practices like misclassifying their workers as independent contractors to avoid paying decent wages and benefits and getting policymakers to give them special tax breaks. And some politicians and wealthy elites are trying to manipulate us and divide our families against each other, rather than work to build an economy that truly works for all of us.

What can we do?

Through smart policy choices, we can build a more fair, more robust, and thriving economy that works for families today and in the future. We can choose to break down barriers to opportunity and invest in what we know helps working people, small businesses, and families to thrive.

Advance commonsense policies

- Invest in today's and tomorrow's families through helping more families afford child care while raising wages to improve the lives of child care workers and address staff shortages that make it hard for families to find child care.
- Step up to the plate on housing affordability through a state-level program modeled on the successful — but limited — federal Housing Choice Voucher Program.
- Broaden access to paid sick leave and paid family and medical leave so that no one has to choose between caring for a sick child or putting food on the table.
- Level the economic playing field for small businesses by expanding access to affordable healthcare for small business owners, expanding access to credit, and ending unfair tax giveaways for large multinational corporations that try to play our states against each other.

Learn more & engage

Many organizations, from unions of working people to small minority business alliances, are working to increase economic opportunity for Virginia families. You can learn more about labor unions from AFL-CIO's intro page (aflcio.org/what-unions-do) and Virginia's wide-ranging small business alliances include such organizations as the Virginia Hispanic Chamber, the Metropolitan Business League, the Virginia Asian Chamber of Commerce, and many more.

Together, we can...

Strengthen Worker Power

Everyone deserves safe jobs, family-sustaining wages, and time to spend with their loved ones.

By joining together in a union and putting power in workers' hands, working people in Virginia can make sure that every one of us can care for our families, earn a fair return on our work, and make our voices heard and our rights respected.

But far too many people in Virginia are still living paycheck-to-paycheck while greedy corporations divide us, hoping that people in Virginia will look the other way while they steal the profits from our hard work. And the decline in unions since the late 1970s has contributed to substantial wage losses among working people, including those who do not belong to a union. Corporations and politicians, threatened by the solidarity of working people, have attempted to suppress efforts by working people to improve their lives.

What can we do?

We can transform the lives of Virginia workers by strengthening collective bargaining rights across the state. When workers can bargain together, we can win safer workplaces, higher wages, and better benefits for all our families — particularly for people who have been most harmed by the status quo. Even people who aren't themselves union members receive wage boosts when many of their neighbors are in a union.

Advance commonsense policies

- Fix the state law to fully recognize the collective bargaining rights of local government and school board employees throughout the commonwealth and, in the meantime, support the passage of local collective bargaining ordinances in each locality and school division.
- Repeal the prohibition on collective bargaining for state employees.
- Repeal the often misunderstood Right-to-Work law, which erodes worker power.

Learn more & engage

- Research labor organizing history in your area. Get started at bit.ly/va-labor-history.
- Support local unions of working people and their organizing campaigns.
- Learn more about how "Right-to-work" laws erode worker protections at epi.org/research/right-to-work/ and share with your neighbors and friends.
- Contact your legislator to pass pro-worker legislation.

Did you know that working people covered by a union contract are paid 10.2% more on average compared to their peers?



Together, we can...

Raise the Minimum Wage

Everyone in our communities who works a full-time job should bring home enough to feed their family and keep a roof overhead.

But for too many families, that isn't the case – not because they're not trying hard, but because their job doesn't pay enough to make ends meet. Even after our progress in raising Virginia's minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$12 an hour, 1 in every 10 Virginia workers was still paid less than \$15 an hour in late 2023 and early 2024. Virginia's current minimum wage of \$12 an hour is far below a living wage for even a single adult in Virginia, creating a low floor that limits the bargaining power of working Virginians.

The federal minimum wage hasn't increased in 15 years because some politicians listen to big corporations more than working people. Virginia's minimum wage has increased to \$12 an hour, with legislation passed in 2020 outlining a pathway to \$15 in 2026. Yet Governor Youngkin vetoed bills that the Virginia House of Delegates and Senate passed in 2024 to keep Virginia on that pathway to a \$15 minimum wage. And when Virginia legislators set the \$12 level back in 2020, they did not anticipate the sustained period of higher inflation resulting from supply-chain bottlenecks and the war in Ukraine. Until we see real change, the Virginia minimum wage will never recover from that unexpectedly high inflation, and will only be adjusted beginning January 1, 2025 using cost of living data starting in 2023 (never capturing the unexpectedly high inflation of 2020-2022). Because the starting point is so low, these wage increases will never be enough for families to actually afford the costs of the essentials.

What can we do?

The minimum wage is a crucial labor standard that bolsters the bargaining power of people who are paid low wages and particularly improves the wages and lives of working women of color. Raising the wage will boost take-home pay, lower poverty, and help stabilize families. Most workers who will benefit work at least 35 hours a week, 9 out of every 10 are over age 20, most are workers of color, and 6 out of every 10 are women.

Advance commonsense policies

- Raise the minimum wage to at least \$15 an hour.
- Include farmworkers in labor protections, undoing a legacy of exclusion that's left over from the 1930s.

Learn more & engage

- Talk to your neighbors and friends about what raising Virginia's minimum wage might mean for them.
- Follow organizations like New Virginia Majority and The Commonwealth Institute to learn more about the fight to raise Virginia's minimum wage.

Who would benefit from raising the minimum wage?

- most work 35+ hrs/wk
- 9/10 are >20 yrs old
- most are working people of color
- 6/10 are women

Together, we can...

Advance Tax Policy that Helps Families Make Ends Meet

Families deserve meaningful support that recognizes that providing our children what they need to be healthy and cared for is increasingly expensive.

Even with slowed inflation, families are facing volatile and high prices of everyday goods and services, and parents have limited access to family-focused tax credits, which help them to afford the basics. Pandemic-era federal assistance, such as an expanded Child Tax Credit (CTC), that helped to lift families and children out of poverty has now ended.

Lawmakers at the federal level did not take action to continue the impactful pandemic-era expansions of the federal CTC, which had removed many of the barriers for lower-income families to accessing the credit and

increased the credit amount. As a result, over 360,000 Virginia children, over half of whom are Black and Latino, are left without access to the full federal credit. And Virginia state lawmakers have not leveraged momentum of the expanded credits' success, failing to establish a state-level Child Tax Credit. While Virginia offers two versions of a state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) — 15% or 20% of the federal EITC — restrictions remain on the larger EITC option (it is nonrefundable), and many of our neighbors are unable to access the full benefit of the state EITC offered.

Virginia lawmakers can work to improve the state EITC and establish a Commonwealth Kids Credit to provide meaningful support to low-income families and families with children.

Advance commonsense policies

- Increase the state refundable EITC equivalent from 15% to 20% of the federal credit, allowing all qualifying families to access the full benefit of the state EITC.
- Consider increasing the refundable state credit beyond 20% of the federal credit, providing low-income families more support to pay for what their families need.
- Create a Commonwealth Kids Credit and consider a range of design principles. A \$500 credit per child for families with incomes below \$100,000 would reach over 1 million children in over 640,000 Virginia households. Lawmakers could cut Virginia's child poverty in half through a more sizeable credit, around \$4,000 plus a young-child bonus, that phases out at higher incomes much like the EITC.



I see first hand the needs of our families while working in our youth programs providing much needed direct support in our community. Targeting funding towards a refundable Child Tax Credit and strengthening the Earned Income Tax Credit would provide a lift to those that need it most.

*- Janell S.
Hebron VA | Petersburg*

What can we do?

Learn more & engage

- Learn more about creating a Commonwealth Kids Credit. Get started at bit.ly/va-ctc.
- Check out how an improved state EITC helps our neighbors with low incomes at bit.ly/va-eitc-2023.
- Contact us at www.taxfairnessforvirginia.org to get involved and help fix our upside-down tax code! Learn how you can share your story, educate lawmakers, and be a part of the process to advance tax justice in Virginia.



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We dream of a Virginia with...

Safe & Healthy Communities

Whether we're Black, white or brown, living in a small town or a big city, we want our families to be whole and our communities to be vibrant. Joining together, we can make sure our elected leaders invest in us, creating the schools, services and care we all need, so that our communities are healthy and safe for every one of us.



Together, we can...

Build on Medicaid Progress

Everyone in Virginia — no matter how much we make or what language we speak — deserves a strong health care safety net program able to provide critical behavioral, physical, and dental health services in a timely manner.

Years of community advocacy led to Virginia lawmakers expanding access to Medicaid, resulting in greater access to coverage for adults and children and increased financial security for those who enrolled since expansion went into effect in 2019.

Too many of our neighbors go uninsured despite being eligible for Medicaid health coverage due to a lack of knowledge of their options, issues with language access, and administrative barriers to enrolling in and keeping coverage. Once enrolled, some have trouble finding a provider who accepts Medicaid and is accessible to them.

Virginia lawmakers have not adequately invested in the Medicaid program for years. This leads to long waiting times, going without treatment, or expensive emergency department visits that could have been avoided. And powerful stakeholders have disregarded commonsense solutions to reducing administrative barriers to coverage and improving language access.



Making sure that the individuals in our communities are healthy will only go towards making sure that the state of Virginia is a place where people can work, spend time with family, and be overall productive members of our community. Together we can make sure Virginia is a state for lovers — lovers of healthy, thriving communities!

- Jay B. | K.U.S.P. | Hampton Roads

What can we do?

Virginia lawmakers can build on the progress of Medicaid expansion by removing bureaucratic red tape that stands in the way of enrolling and keeping health coverage. We can modernize and invest in our Medicaid program so more people can access care before health issues become an emergency.

Advance commonsense policies

- Encourage more providers to accept Medicaid clients by increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates and making sure Medicaid insurance companies offer plenty of provider options.
- Streamline enrollment and reduce admin burden through innovative initiatives, such as building upon Easy Enrollment via state tax forms, that could help enroll eligible people.
- Invest in a statewide language access hotline and website available to state agencies, service providers, and Virginia residents.
- Increase the number of Community Health Workers (CHWs), who can connect families to health services through a culturally appropriate understanding of a community's needs, by developing a Medicaid reimbursement model for CHWs.

Learn more & engage

- Join the movement to reduce barriers to Medicaid coverage and services in Virginia led by the Healthcare for All Virginians Coalition. Sign your organization on as a Medicaid access supporter at bit.ly/hav-sign-up.
- Connect to the trained navigators and enrollment experts at [EnrollVirginia!](https://enrollvirginia.org) if you or a loved one are experiencing difficulty applying for or accessing Medicaid or ACA marketplace coverage.



Together, we can... Cover All Kids

The families of every child in Virginia should be able to access health care when needed without worrying that medical bills will impact their ability to pay for essentials like rent, food, or transportation.

Medical bills can cause a strain on any budget, but especially for our neighbors living paycheck to paycheck. Medicaid and CHIP covered nearly 838,000 children in Virginia at the start of 2024. Unfortunately, access to this affordable and comprehensive health coverage is still unattainable for families of some children in Virginia simply due to immigration status requirements.

Lack of access to preventative care and delays in medical treatment can lead to avoidable emergency department visits costing the state and Virginia families.

Roughly 13,000 children face barriers to health care because they are barred from coverage due to outdated and backwards eligibility rules. Certain Virginia lawmakers have voted down the opportunity to provide these children with coverage despite having the financial resources and opportunity to pass policies to fix this.



In a just and equitable Virginia, every child's right to comprehensive and affordable health coverage transcends immigration status. We envision a future where families never have to choose between their child's health and life's necessities. We must tear down the barriers that deny coverage to 13,000 children, invest in their well-being, and unite as a community. Together, we can ensure every child receives the care they deserve, regardless of who they are or where they're from.

- Crimson S. | COSPU | Harrisonburg

What can we do?

Virginia lawmakers should invest in the health and well-being of Virginia's future generations. It is time to fund and vote for a policy to create a health coverage program available to all children from low and moderate-income families, regardless of immigration status.

Advance commonsense policies

- Invest just \$19.3 million over the next two years so that more children can access health coverage via a Cover All Kids program.
- Increase the maximum income threshold for children's health coverage so more families with children can access affordable and comprehensive coverage. Only two states (ID and ND) have lower maximum income thresholds than Virginia.
- Provide dedicated funding for targeted outreach campaigns to enroll all eligible but not currently enrolled children in health coverage.

Learn more & engage

- Join the movement to Cover All Kids in Virginia led by the Healthcare for All Virginians Coalition. Consider joining one of the grassroots organizations that form the coalition's base.
- Sign your organization on as a Cover All Kids supporter at bit.ly/support-cover-va-kids.
- Share how you or a loved one has been impacted by lack of health coverage simply due to a child's immigration status at bit.ly/my-health-story-va.
- Connect with organizations that support our immigrant neighbors, such as Hamkae Center, CASA, and Richmond Region LULAC.



Together, we can...

Support Safe Communities

Whatever our race, background or zip code, we all want our children to know they can live, learn, work, and play without fear of violence.

Too often, we face violence against and within our communities. One area that warrants lawmakers' attention is youth violence, which affects communities across Virginia. While we can't provide all the answers for why it's happening or how to end it, we do know that lawmakers have made choices to invest heavily in some communities while leaving others to fend for themselves.

There's no singular solution to eradicating youth violence. Still, we must address root causes we are aware of, such as barriers to adequate family income and shortage of safe and affordable housing. It also helps to intentionally

engage with and invest in our community's youth, particularly through community-centered programs that uplift their well-being and development.

State lawmakers can play a critical role at each stage by engaging with communities to co-create solutions — such as advancing policies that create greater economic opportunity and funding critical supports like education and affordable housing, as discussed throughout “Collective Agenda” — so that communities can create safe and vibrant places to live and to ensure full and healthy futures for our kids.

What can we do?

Advance commonsense policies

- Making meaningful investments in community-based programs and resources that promote greater economic opportunity for youth and their families and affordable health care access provides youth and their families a sense of peace and stability and helps to *prevent* violence.
- *Diversion* programs help keep kids from involvement in and reduce further engagements with the legal system. Creating alternative avenues for youth, such as community-based and extra-curricular activities, can go a long way in helping them maintain positive ties to their communities and give them a sense of hope that they have not been given up on.
- Youth exiting the legal system are often left unprepared for returning to their communities and saddled with court debt. Connecting them to resources such as well-funded education, affordable housing, and health care; helping them establish genuine community relationships; and eliminating youth fines and fees fosters *restoration* and can empower them to return to and positively impact their communities.
- Violence can have a resounding impact on community members' physical and mental health. Programs like peer support groups can create a safe space for youth to process and support their mental health. Creating long-term solutions for broader community care in concert with youth and their families will foster a sense of belonging and make sure community members feel heard and that their needs are met.



Our youth and young adults deserve to grow up and live out their dreams. We must support efforts that lift families out of poverty, provide resources to community members returning from incarceration, and expose children to experiences that expand their minds.

- Sulaymaan A. We R Me Foundation | Richmond

Learn more & engage

Connect with organizations who are working to make sure families have what they need to thrive, including:

- RISE for Youth
- Debt Free Justice Coalition
- Legal Aid Justice Center
- New Virginia Majority
- Pre-Trial Justice Coalition
- Voices for Va's Children
- The Humble Hustle
- The Family One
- Hebron VA Inc
- NolefTurns
- FailSafe
- K.U.S.P
- We R Me
- I Vote Me





We dream of a Virginia with...

Great Public Schools for Every Student

Every child, regardless of race, ability, or zip code, needs a public school with full and fair funding, well-supported teachers, and nurses, counselors, and other supports that ensure they can thrive. By joining together across race and place, we can rewrite the rules to ensure every school has the resources to set kids up to be all that they dream.



Together, we can...

Fully, Fairly Fund Our Schools

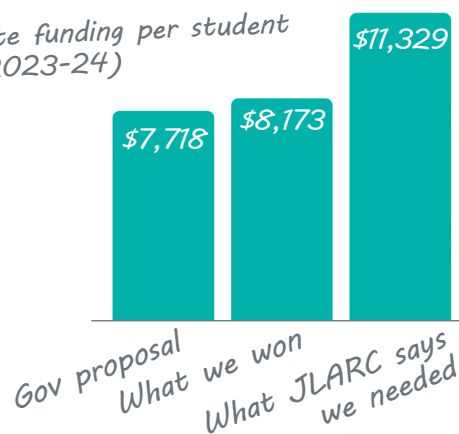
Children and families deserve to live in a commonwealth where every community has high-quality public schools where children can thrive.

Falling test scores in Virginia compared to other states followed falling state funding compared to other states. Virginia has the capacity to do well — we're a top 12 state in terms of median household income — but were 36th in the country in state per-student funding during the 2020-2021 school year. In some places, the local government can and does make up for the state's failings, but in many lower-income communities, local governments don't have the capacity to do so, leaving children without access to the education they need to reach their full potential.

The state isn't doing its part to make sure every student in every zipcode has access to a great education: in December 2023, Virginia received "D" grades from the national Education Law Center in all three categories of K-12 adequacy, equity, and effort. And to make matters worse, some powerful politicians are trying to divide us and root against our schools. They're jeopardizing the resources we need to fund our schools through harmful tax cut and voucher proposals that primarily benefit the wealthy.

Together, we won more funding for the 2023-2024 school year than what was originally proposed! But there's more to be done.

(State funding per student for 2023-24)



What can we do?

We know what it takes to make sure every student has access to a high-quality education. Decades of high-quality research shows that money matters for student outcomes, and the state's own research agency, JLARC, has provided recommendations for how to get to what our students need. By working together we can make sure elected officials put our shared resources toward creating great public schools in every community.

Advance commonsense policies

- Deliver more mental and behavioral health specialists at the schools to address the mental health crisis facing our students
- Provide more help for students and teachers by fully lifting the arbitrary cap on state funding for support staff
- Address recruitment and retention challenges by making teacher pay competitive with other states and other professions
- Reject diversions of public funds to exclusionary, unaccountable private schools
- Provide targeted help for students who face the highest barriers, including English language learners, students with disabilities, and students in low-income communities
- Improve school climates through mentorship programs, wrap-around services, credible messengers, and other effective supports for students and educators.
- Include the voices of impacted stakeholders, including students, parents, and teachers facing the highest barriers, in every conversation about improving and transforming Virginia's school funding formula.

Learn more & engage

Join the movement to strengthen Virginia's public schools. Learn more through the Fund Our Schools coalition. Consider joining one of the grassroots organizations that form the coalition's base. Or consider whether an organization you're already connected with would be interested in joining the coalition!



We dream of a Virginia with...

A Fair Tax Code & Ample Resources

When we all pitch in our fair share of taxes, we can fully fund education, health care, and other programs that help everyone thrive, no exceptions. While special interests and those at the top have rigged the rules to get out of paying what they owe, together, we can flip Virginia's upside-down tax code and raise the shared resources we need to achieve our shared goals.



Together, we can...

Make Sure Everyone Pitches in Their Fair Share

To fund our collective goals, we need to raise state resources that last long into the future in ways that lift up rather than burden our low-income neighbors while ensuring the wealthiest among us pay their fair share.

Virginia has the capacity to fund our priorities, but our upside-down tax code — in which the wealthiest pay the least taxes as a share of income— limits our resources. In order to fund meaningful investments in economic security, education, health care, and more, there needs to be increased and sustainable revenue streams. And they should be set up in a way that also makes our tax code more fair.

In recent years, lawmakers have voted to make significant and lasting tax cuts, claiming a revenue ‘surplus’ despite underfunding critical services. Despite making cuts, lawmakers have not established new revenue streams, permanently decreasing available resources.



After a decade in the private sector and a decade in public education — 20 years of work — I have not achieved a salary of \$50,000, and I am in the same tax bracket as millionaires in Virginia! Creating a new tax bracket will ensure everyone pays their fair share, while providing much needed increases in funding for education and housing.

*- Katina M., M.Ed., M.S.
Black HOPE VA | Hopewell*

What can we do?

Lawmakers can create a sustainable revenue source to fund our collective goals, while ensuring the wealthiest among us pay their fair share, by establishing a new income tax bracket on high incomes. In a report on a more fair income tax structure from fall 2022, the legislature’s independent research group (JLARC) laid out several options that would raise revenues, including establishing a new tax bracket on income over \$1 million.

Advance commonsense policies

- Establish a new top state income tax bracket of 10%, but only for annual income over \$1 million. This would not include the value of held assets like someone’s house or car. If you had \$1,000,001 in taxable income, only \$1 would be taxed at a higher rate.
- This was estimated to generate over \$3 billion in the state’s two-year budget, which could be earmarked for important goals such as increased education funding.

Learn more & engage

- Get acquainted with how the budget and tax policies work in Virginia at bit.ly/va-budget-matters
- Contact us at www.taxfairnessforvirginia.org to get involved and help fix our upside-down tax code! Learn how you can share your story, lobby lawmakers, and be a part of the process of advancing tax justice in Virginia.

Virginia's Future Collective Agenda for

for Virginia's Future Collective Agenda

We've come together in the past to lift our voices and



Image credit: Vertical Sandbox Productions



Together, we can continue building the Virginia we dream

for Virginia's Future Collective

Virginia's Future Collective Agenda

make critical progress for our families and communities...



Image source: Wikimedia Commons

Image source: WRIC



of — a Virginia where everyone thrives, no exceptions!

Virginia's Future Collective Agenda





The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis advances racial and economic justice in Virginia by advocating for public policies that are designed in partnership with people most impacted, and shaped by credible, accessible fiscal and policy research.

www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org



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