

Long-Awaited Fire and EMS Needs Assessment Report Released



An eye-opening report on the state and needs of Virginia's Fire and EMS services was recently submitted to the General Assembly and Virginia Fire Services Board. The report is titled, "Service to Others: A Report on the Commonwealth's Fire and EMS Service," and is the culmination of workgroup study required by [HB 2175](#) from the 2023 General Assembly session. In short, the report found that fire and EMS call volume has significantly increased, volunteer providers have decreased, and state level funding has only increased slightly despite these factors and in the face of massive spikes in equipment prices.

The workgroup developed the Virginia Fire and EMS Needs Assessment and Survey, the first statewide review of fire and EMS in recent memory. 87% of the state's cities and counties responded to the survey, representing almost 7.5 million Virginia citizens. This survey illustrated that pass-through funding, coupled with increasing call volume and decreasing volunteer providers, was leading to untenable situations in localities related to fire and EMS. Call volume in the last three years has increased by 40%, while state level funding for fire and EMS has increased by only 6.67%. In addition, rising prices for equipment are leading to older equipment and longer replacement plans.

The workgroup recommends that the Virginia General Assembly consider multiple options to better protect citizens and assist localities with fire and EMS funding. Current funding is not sustainable for future growth in the Commonwealth. Direct funding for staffing,

in a program similar to HB 599 funding or the funding of sheriff's offices is recommended. Additionally, raising the amount of funding for the Fire Programs Fund, as well as the establishment of a staffing grant program, would be beneficial. Other programs to consider include statewide equipment contracts and loan programs for fire departments and EMS agencies.

As previously [reported](#), this VACo supported bill directed the Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security to convene a workgroup with various representatives of relevant state agencies and stakeholder groups, and *report the work group's findings and any recommendations to the Chairmen of the House Committee on General Laws and the Senate Committee on General Laws and Technology on or before October 1, 2023*. VACo staff and members served on the workgroup and assisted in the gathering of information from county administrators and other state county associations on fire and EMS needs and in the development of the report's recommendations. A budget amendment requesting \$125,000 to facilitate the hiring of a consultant for the workgroup's tasks, including evaluating fire service needs, funding sustainability, and examining alternative funding models, was pursued. Despite this effort, the specified funds were not incorporated into the approved budget. Consequently, the accompanying report presents conclusions and suggestions derived from the workgroup's own proficiency and findings.

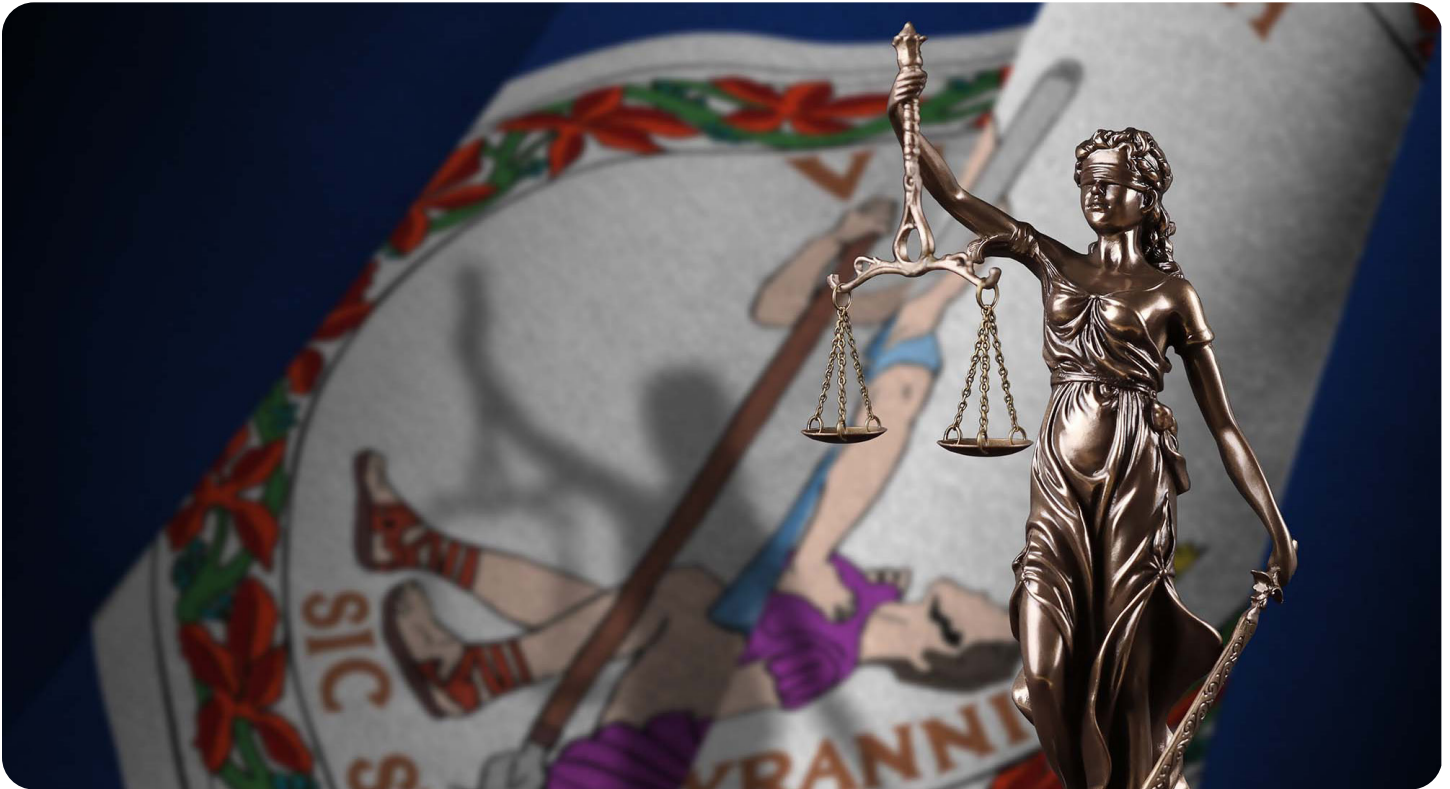
The report found that localities reported a total of 19,299 fire and EMS providers, both career and volunteer. The Federal Emergency Management Agency reports that in 2023, 70.7% of fire departments are volunteer, which is slightly above the national average of 70%. The survey found that 91% of respondents reported a decrease in volunteer fire and EMS providers over the past three years. Most localities stated that citizens' financial constraints, employment policies, and a decreasing interest by younger generations were major contributors to the significant decline in volunteers. The decline in volunteer providers is directly related to the inability of Virginia's fire and EMS service to provide adequate staffing for fire and EMS. 82% of localities, when asked if they met the minimum staffing standards required by regulation by the Virginia Department of Health's Office of Emergency Medical Services, stated that they always met the standard. This means that 18% of the Commonwealth is not protected adequately regarding EMS. In contrast, when asked if their locality met National Fire Protection Association standards regarding fire protection, 70% stated they could only sometimes, never or rarely meet these minimum standards for safety.

Unfortunately, despite this urgent, statewide, and cross-jurisdictional need, the letter accompanying the report from Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security Terrance C. Cole stated that "policy solutions should be largely focused at the local level," and that "while there is merit in the individual recommendations of the report, it lacks a realistic policy and funding recommendation." VACo urges the General Assembly to provide additional resources that would assist local governments with the recruitment, retention, training, and support of first responders such as law enforcement, fire and EMS personnel, and 9-1-1 dispatchers.

The full report may be found [here](#).

VACo Contact: [Jeremy R. Bennett](#)

JLARC Reviews State's System of Indigent Defense and Criminal Prosecution



The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) received a [report](#) at its November 13 meeting on the results of a study of the state's system of indigent criminal defense and prosecution of criminal cases.

JLARC staff found that the state's public defenders provide effective representation, but that workloads in public defenders' offices have risen due to more challenging and complex cases requiring more time to prepare and defend. Although recent efforts by the General Assembly to improve staffing and salaries for attorneys have helped to fill vacant positions, even if all vacant positions were filled, the public defender system would have enough attorneys to handle only 87 percent of its workload; staff suggested that the creation of new offices might be considered in the future after filling all currently allocated positions and assessing the impact on offices' workload. In the near term, JLARC staff highlighted insufficient support staff positions as another area of pressure on public defenders' offices, and recommended increasing funding for mitigation specialists and paralegal positions as a cost-effective way to reduce attorneys' workload.

JLARC staff also found that vacancies in Commonwealth's Attorneys' offices have increased in recent years, with offices experiencing more turnover in attorney positions and longer times needed to fill vacant positions. Similar to public defenders' offices, even if all positions currently allocated by the Compensation Board were filled, state-funded staffing would not be adequate to meet the statewide workload. The new staffing standards adopted by the Compensation Board this summer after a study by the National Center for State Courts would provide a 15 percent increase in staffing (at a cost of \$9.2 million annually to the state). These standards reflect workload calculations for prosecuting felonies

only; an additional 391 positions would be required for Commonwealth's Attorneys' offices to prosecute all misdemeanors. JLARC's report also documents the significant local commitment to supporting Commonwealth's Attorneys' offices, pointing out that localities reported providing \$22.7 million to supplement salaries for state-funded positions in FY 2023 (a 28 percent increase over the state salaries), in addition to funding 292 additional attorney positions at purely local expense (at an estimated cost of \$30 million).

The report discusses recent state efforts to increase salaries for public defenders and Commonwealth's Attorneys' staff, as well as local supplements to these offices. While most Commonwealth's Attorneys' offices receive local salary supplements, about half of public defender offices (which are composed of state employees) receive a local salary supplement, and these supplements are generally lower than those provided to prosecutors; public defender offices with a smaller difference between their salaries and the compensation of prosecutors in their locality generally have fewer vacancies and less turnover. However, the report notes that there is no state policy requiring parity in these supplements. VACo has historically advocated for additional state support for realistic levels of staffing and compensation for the offices of public defenders and Commonwealth's Attorneys to enable these offices to fulfill their responsibilities; while some localities are able to provide additional support from local dollars to support these functions, others do not have the resources.

JLARC staff also reviewed the state's system of representation by court-appointed attorneys, pointing out that low caps on compensation have discouraged attorneys from serving in this role. The overall number of court-appointed attorneys has declined since FY 2013, with the numbers dropping more rapidly in the last few years and the decrease affecting some areas of the state more significantly. Although Virginia's hourly rate for court-appointed attorneys is largely in line with rates in other states, Virginia's caps on overall compensation per case, which have not changed in more than 20 years, are lower than neighboring states.

Staff provided a series of recommendations and policy options in the report, including:

- Increasing pay caps for court-appointed attorneys representing indigent clients. Staff recommended that if the General Assembly increases pay caps, it may wish to consider restructuring the categories of offenses for court-appointed attorney payments.
- Including funding for additional support staff to assist with the workload of attorneys in public defender offices.
- Increasing state funds for career prosecutor pay stipends and limiting these stipends to attorneys in offices where the locality does not provide salary supplements to Commonwealth's Attorneys' staff. (This proposal is intended to address a situation noted in the report in which offices with greater local salary supplements also have more career prosecutors.)
- Expanding the number of existing positions in public defender offices designated as senior trial attorney positions in order to provide career advancement for public defenders. Establishing pay bands for public defender attorney positions to allow effective attorneys to receive higher salaries without being promoted to a new job title.



Visit Isle of Wight County and the Isle of Wight County Historic Courthouse

Location: 17140 Monument Circle / Courthouse Highway 258

Built: 1800 – 1801

Style: Colonial Revival

Architect: Major Francis Boykin

Contractor: Major Francis Boykin

Description: The building faces southeast and is a two story red colored brick structure. The building is located on spacious landscaped grounds in the center of Isle of Wight to the south of the courthouse. The southeast front of the original center section has a large portico with four narrow white colored columns rising to a pediment at the roof line. The recessed entrance is framed with white colored wood. The roof is hipped. In the interior is the former courtroom which is now the Commissioners Chamber. The building was remodeled in 1815 and 1903. An addition was built in 1822 and a fire proof vault added in 1892. The building was renovated in 1954 to 1955. The architect was Paul D Woodward and the contractor was Z Turner. In 1987, additions were constructed on the north and south sides. The additions have numerous arches along an arcade and are named as the Memorial Addition. The architect was Talbot & Associates, Ltd and the contractor was Henderson, Inc.

Note: Major Francis Boykin donated the land for the courthouse and saw to the erection of the courthouse and the tavern on the south side.

SOURCE: courthouses.co

SAVE THE DATES!

VACo/VML/VAPDC Local Government Day

**Thursday, February 1, 2024
Richmond Marriott**

VACo/VML Legislative Reception

**Thursday, February 1, 2024
Richmond Marriott**

VACo Chairpersons' Institute

**Friday, February 2, 2024 and
Saturday, February 3, 2024
VACo Headquarters**

Join us for these important events.

Call VACo at 804.788.6652 for more information



V A C o / V M L / V A P D C

LOCAL GOVERNMENT



DAY

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2024
RICHMOND MARRIOTT HOTEL

First Name

Title

County/Organization

Email

Credit Card Number

Expiration Date

NAME ON CARD

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER ONLINE](#)

Refund Policy: Requests for registration refunds are honored if received by January 12, 2024. Substitutions are allowed in the event a supervisor is unable to attend. For more information, call 804.343.2507.

EVENT DETAILS**LOCATION** | Richmond Marriott Hotel**TIME AND DATE** | Thursday, February 1**COST - PLEASE CHECK ONE**☐

\$100 Day Briefing Only (Noon - 2pm)

☐

\$100 Reception Only (530pm)

☐

\$150 Day Briefing and Reception

AGENDA**9am** | VACo Board of Directors Meeting**11am** | Registration**1130am** | Lunch**Noon** | Local Government Day**Afternoon** | Visit the Capitol to speak with legislators**530pm** | Reception

FAX COMPLETED REGISTRATION FORM WITH CREDIT CARD INFORMATION TO 804.788.0083.

OR PLEASE MAKE CHECK PAYABLE TO VACo. MAIL CHECK AND REGISTRATION FORM TO 1207 EAST MAIN STREET, RICHMOND, VA 23219.

Hotel Reservation Details: Lodging costs are not covered in the registration fee. Local Government Day is held at the Richmond Marriott Hotel, 500 East Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23219. Room rates start at \$179 (single room occupancy). To reserve a hotel room, call 800.228.9290 by January 9, 2024, with this code: **Local Government Day** or reserve a room at this [Richmond Marriott Hotel link](#).

THANK YOU FOR REGISTERING!

CHAIRPERSONS' INSTITUTE



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2024 AND SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2024

\$350 attendee | Breakout Sessions at VACo HEADQUARTERS

Meals and Accommodation at [Richmond Marriott Hotel](#)

Transportation is provided

NAME: _____

TITLE: _____

EMAIL: _____

COUNTY/ORGANIZATION: _____

CREDIT CARD NUMBER: _____

EXPIRATION DATE: _____

NAME ON THE CARD: _____

Hotel Reservation Details: Lodging costs are not covered in the registration fee. Lodging for the Chairpersons' Institute is at the Richmond Marriott Hotel, 500 East Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23219. Room rates start at \$179 (single room occupancy). To reserve a hotel room, call 800.228.9290 by January 9, 2024, with this code: **VACo Local Government Day** or reserve a room at this [Richmond Marriott Hotel link](#).

Fax completed registration form with credit card information to 804.788.0083.

PLEASE CONTACT
VALERIE RUSSELL AT
VRUSSELL@VACO.ORG
WITH ANY QUESTIONS.

Or please make check payable to VACo. Mail check and completed registration form to 1207 East Main Street, Richmond, VA 23219.



Registration Fee: \$350 Attendee | \$175 Guest

Or [click here](#) to register online.



Refund Policy: Requests for registration refunds are honored if received by January 12, 2024. Substitutions are allowed in the event a supervisor is unable to attend. For more information, call VACo at 804.343.2507.



County of Powhatan, Virginia

3834 Old Buckingham Road
Powhatan, VA 23139

Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 4, 2023

Contact:

Brigid Paciello, PIO, County of Powhatan

Email: bpaciello@powhatanva.gov Phone: (804) 598-5696

Powhatan County Hires Director of Public Works

POWHATAN, VA - Powhatan County is proud to announce the appointment of Brian Copple as the new Director of Public Works, effective December 1, 2023. This appointment comes after a thorough and competitive selection process, reflecting our commitment to enhancing the county's infrastructure and services.

Brian brings a wealth of experience to Powhatan County, having served in various capacities in public works management over 30 years. Most recently, he held positions with VDOT and the City of Richmond, where he successfully managed numerous infrastructure projects.



In this role, Brian will oversee the county's public works department, which includes management building maintenance, water and wastewater management, and Capital Improvement Projects. His vast experience in project management will be invaluable in driving forward the county's strategic objectives.

"We are thrilled to welcome Brian to our team. His experience and leadership qualities are exactly what Powhatan County needs to ensure our public works infrastructure meets the needs of our community," said Will Hagy, Assistant County Administrator.

"I am honored to join Powhatan County and contribute to its growth and development. I look forward to working with the talented team at the Public Works Department and engaging with the community to deliver high-quality public services," said Brian Copple.

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Composite Index of Local Ability-to-Pay (LCI) Published for 2024-2026 Biennium



On November 27, Dr. Lisa Coons, State Superintendent of Public Instruction at the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), released a [memo](#) publishing The Composite Index of Local Ability-to-Pay for the 2024-2026 biennium, which will begin on July 1, 2024. These figures are crucial to calculating the state share of projected school division payments for the Governor's introduced budget, but also any final budget agreement for the coming fiscal year. The LCI was calculated using 2021 base-year data provided by the Department of Taxation for Virginia adjusted gross income (AGI), taxable retail sales, and true value of real property. The estimates of local population for 2021 are provided by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia, and the actual March 31, 2022, average daily membership (ADM) is based on data reported by school divisions to the Virginia Department of Education.

The calculation of the LCI is a complicated process. At the most recent meeting of the VACo Education Steering Committee, Jim Regimbal of Fiscal Analytics gave a detailed presentation on how VDOE calculates these figures. The slides of his PowerPoint may be viewed [here](#). In addition to population and ADM data, the data points used in the formulation of the LCI are weighted in the following percentages:

- True value of real property (weighted 50 percent)
- Adjusted gross income (weighted 40 percent)
- Taxable retail sales (weighted 10 percent)

Each locality's index is adjusted to maintain an overall statewide local share of 45 percent and an overall state share of 55 percent. In short, a lower LCI means the state will provide a higher share of funding for the Standards of Quality (SOQs). As previously [reported](#), funding of the SOQs only accounts for a portion of the actual cost of K-12 education. Local governments provide the majority share of funding.

More information on the LCI and the Excel sheet showing the data points may be viewed [here](#) and [here](#) respectively.

VACo Contact: [Jeremy R. Bennett](#)

Commission on Youth Adopts Recommendations from 2023 Studies



At its meeting on November 20, the Commission on Youth adopted a series of recommendations from the two studies Commission staff undertook this year. Draft recommendations had been circulated for public comment earlier in the fall and VACo reported on the studies' key findings and proposed recommendations in an [earlier County Connections article](#).

Adopted recommendations from the Commission's study of improving the state's foster care system include the following:

- Establish a centralized training academy model for family services specialists in local departments of social services so that staff are better prepared for these challenging jobs. VACo has historically supported this proposal, which seeks to reduce turnover in the local workforce.
- Encourage the Department of Social Services to create partnerships with additional colleges and universities for the Child Welfare Stipend Program, which supports social work students who in turn commit to work at a local department of social services, and increase the number of stipend slots. VACo has also supported expansion of this program to assist local departments with recruitment and retention.
- Request the State Corporation Commission to prepare a report on what steps would be necessary to permit nonprofit and for-profit private foster care agencies to join group self-insurance pools, with the permission of a locality, in order to obtain liability insurance. Request the Department of Social Services to form a workgroup on the issue of liability insurance for private foster care agencies.
- Request the Department of Social Services to survey local departments to ensure that the Faster Families Highway (which provides a platform for potential foster parents to connect with local departments) is providing necessary information.
- Fund the continuation of the Exceptional Circumstances Payment pilot program, which provides up to an additional \$3000 per month for foster families, for up to three months, to support emergency situations or additional supervision for a foster child.
- Request the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services and the Department of Social Services to assess the barriers to availability of substance use disorder treatment services

and make recommendations for establishing systems to address parental substance use and prevent the entry of children into foster care. Request the Virginia Opioid Abatement Authority to provide technical assistance to local governments that were disproportionately affected by the opioid epidemic.

- Support the development and implementation of a program to support youth in foster care and formerly in care in obtaining a driver's license.
- Direct the Commission on Youth to review concerns regarding reports of increased use by parents of relief of custody to place challenging children or youth in foster care.
- Request the Department of Social Services to review a set of recommendations to improve informal kinship care, including making a stipend available for informal kinship care families, creating permanency plans for children in informal kinship care situations, and collecting data on informal kinship care.

A full list of recommendations is available at [this link](#) and the staff presentation of the study findings may be found at [this link](#).

The Commission also considered draft recommendations from its study of the admission of minors to a mental health facility for inpatient treatment. This study was generated by legislation proposed during the 2023 session that was referred to the Commission. The bill would have increased from 14 to 16 the minimum age for a minor to consent to admission to a mental health facility for inpatient treatment, and added addiction as a reason for a minor to be admitted to a mental health facility for inpatient treatment. The bill's patron intended to address situations in which a minor who is 14 or 15 years of age refuses to consent to inpatient treatment that the parent feels is necessary, and to address issues of substance use disorder among youth.

Adopted recommendations from the Commission's study of admission of minors to a mental health facility for inpatient treatment include the following:

- Request the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services to convene a workgroup to consider options for the transportation of minors who are admitted to a mental health facility over their objections through an existing court process.
- Request the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services to provide information on its website on the Psychiatric Treatment of Minors Act.
- Request the Department of Social Services to update guidance and share information with local departments on the process for admission of minors to inpatient treatment.
- Request the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services to provide educational materials to professional associations of psychiatrists and psychologists, as well as to Community Services Boards (CSBs), on the voluntary and involuntary admissions process for minors.
- Request the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services to work with CSBs to target American Rescue Plan Act and other federal funds toward higher intensity substance use disorder services for minors.

The Commission did not adopt a proposal included in its draft recommendations to raise the age at which a minor can object to treatment from 14 to 16. A full list of recommendations may be found at [this link](#), and the staff presentation of study findings may be found at [this link](#).

VACo Contact: [Katie Boyle](#)

Treasury Releases Interim Final Rule Proposing Changes to Definition of “Obligation” for ARPA State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund; Public Comments due December 20



The U.S. Department of the Treasury issued an Interim Final Rule (IFR) in November providing additional flexibility in the definition of “obligation” for State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) provided through the American Rescue Plan Act. The IFR was published in the Federal Register on November 20 and takes effect immediately, but Treasury is seeking public comments, which are due by December 20. Treasury recommends that comments be submitted electronically; comments should be captioned with “Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds Obligation Interim Final Rule Comments,” along with the commenter’s name, organization affiliation, address, email address, and telephone number. The text of the IFR as published in the Federal Register, along with instructions for submitting public comment, may be found at [this link](#). A quick reference guide published by Treasury is available at [this link](#). A recording of a webinar by Treasury providing an overview of the IFR is available at [this link](#), and the webinar slides are posted at [this link](#).

Treasury explains in the IFR that it is amending the definition of “obligation” to address concerns expressed by SLFRF recipients about anticipated difficulty in using SLFRF dollars to meet administrative and legal requirements associated with SLFRF after the December 31, 2024, obligation deadline. The IFR does not change the existing deadlines to obligate and expend funds. However, Treasury is proposing to expand the definition of “obligation” such that “a recipient is also considered to have incurred an obligation by December 31, 2024, with respect to a requirement under federal law or regulation or a provision of the SLFRF award terms and conditions to which the recipient becomes subject as a result of receiving or expending SLFRF funds,” and a recipient may use SLFRF funds to meet such a requirement. Such expenditures include reporting and compliance requirements; Single Audit costs; record retention and internal control requirements; costs to comply with property standards; environmental compliance requirements; and civil rights and nondiscrimination requirements. To take advantage of this flexibility, recipients must “(1) determine the amount of SLFRF funds the recipient estimates it will use to cover such expenditures, (2) document a reasonable justification for this estimate, (3) report that amount to Treasury by April 30, 2024, with an explanation of how the amount was determined, and (4) report at award closeout the final amount expended for these costs.”

The IFR also clarifies that recipients are permitted to replace a contract or subaward that was entered into prior to December 31, 2024, after that date under certain circumstances detailed in the IFR, such as the termination of the contract or subaward due to the contractor or subawardee going out of business, or a determination that the contractor or subrecipient will not be able to perform under the contract or carry out the subaward.

VACo Contact: [Katie Boyle](#)

Virginia Retirement System (VRS) approves FY 2025-2026 employer contribution rates for participating political subdivisions



**June 30, 2023
Annual Actuarial
Valuation Results**

**Presented by: Becky Stouffer, ASA, MAAA, FCA and
Jim Anderson, FSA, EA, MAAA, FCA**



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November 16, 2023

At its November 16 [meeting](#), the VRS Board of Trustees approved FY 2025-2026 employer contribution rates for participating political subdivisions. Gabriel, Roeder, Smith & Company (GRS), the VRS plan actuary, highlighted factors that influenced contribution rates, based on data from the June 30, 2023, valuations. As previously [reported](#), odd year valuations determine employer contributions for the coming biennium.

According to VRS, about two-thirds of the local pension plans (401 employers total) are at least 90% funded on an actuarial value of assets basis. Overall, the number of participants in political subdivision pension plans increased 4% from the prior year and the average salary of political subdivision employees increased 6.2% from the prior year. Also, retirees received near-maximum or maximum cost-of-living adjustments in 2022 and 2023. The aggregate funded status for all political subdivision plans was 88% as of June 30, 2023, on an actuarial value of assets basis, up from 87% in the last rate-setting valuation in 2021.

[More on Next Page](#)

Political subdivision plans contribution rates are calculated based on the assets and liabilities of each individual participating employer, the benefit offerings (enhanced hazardous duty coverage, for example), the demographics of the covered employees and the current funded level of that employer's plan.

Overall, nearly 70% of employers will see an increase in their pension rate of less than 1% based on 2023 valuations. The average actuarially determined employer contribution rate for employers who don't offer enhanced hazardous duty benefits is 5.58%, while the average rate for employers who do offer enhanced hazardous duty benefits is 14.34%.

While the funded status and contribution rates remain stable, plan unfunded liabilities remain. The VRS board approved a funding policy change to reset the total unfunded accrued liability to be amortized over 20 years. This means a slight increase in contribution rates in the short term; however, the action results in getting money into the fund more quickly to be invested sooner, leveling out the amortization payments in later years, which, in general, should generate savings over time. However, the impact of this change on political subdivisions will vary based on individual plan assets and liabilities.

In addition, the board approved FY 2025-2026 contribution rates for the health insurance credit for participating political subdivisions, the Virginia Local Disability Program (VLDP) and the Line of Duty Act (LODA) Fund.

Next quarter, VRS will send actuarial reports to each VRS-participating employer that will include the retirement plan contribution rate, along with rates for the health insurance credit, if applicable. You can view the [actuary's presentation](#) to the board for additional information.

The VRS board also certified the FY 2025-2026 contribution rate for the Line of Duty Act Fund. Pending approval from the General Assembly, participating employers will pay \$995 per full-time employee, an increase from \$830 this fiscal year.

Beginning July 1, 2024, the board-certified employer contribution rates for the retirement plans will apply only to the defined benefit portion of the benefits. As previously [reported](#), legislation passed in 2022, where employers will manage payroll withholding for the defined contribution component independently from the defined benefit component. A delayed effective date of July 1, 2024 allowed time for employers to update payroll systems and to make other changes. Previously, the board-certified employer rates included an estimate of the defined contributions for Hybrid Retirement Plan members. VRS staff will be contacting VACo soon regarding this change and providing further information.

More information the VRS Board of Trustees and the November 16th meeting may be viewed [here](#) and [here](#) respectively.

VACo Contact: [Jeremy R. Bennett](#)

Behavioral Health Commission Reviews School-Based Mental Health Services, Behavioral Health Redesign



At the Behavioral Health Commission's November 13 meeting, Commission members received a briefing on the results of a study of school-based mental health services directed by the 2022 Appropriation Act and adopted several recommendations stemming from that study. Members also received an update on the implementation of the state's initiative to redesign behavioral health services funded by Medicaid.

School-based mental health services: This study examined ways to maximize school-based mental health services, to include evaluating current offerings within school divisions and opportunities to expand services. Staff reported that youth in Virginia are experiencing significant mental health challenges, which school staff believe have worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to services in schools varies; most school divisions offer broad-based programming and other supports provided by teachers or other school staff, such as a social-emotional learning curriculum, a suicide prevention program, or school events dealing with mental health (considered "Tier 1" supports in the Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework). However, more intensive supports are more limited; Commission staff analysis of a survey of school divisions indicates that approximately 45 percent of students who require supports considered Tier 2 and Tier 3 under the Multi-Tiered System of Supports are unable to receive them, either because the services are not offered or there is limited capacity to meet demand. Schools report difficulty in hiring mental health staff, and those staff often have additional responsibilities, such as administrative duties, that limit their ability to provide mental health services.

Infusions of federal pandemic relief funding have enabled school divisions to offer more mental health services in the last several years, but these funds will expire by January 2025. Recent state investments in a pilot program to support mental health services have shown promise, but staff note that more

consistency is needed in order to develop outcome measures, and a reliable funding stream is needed to enable providers to hire staff. Recent expansion of the services provided in the school setting that can be funded by Medicaid is an opportunity for school divisions to increase Medicaid reimbursement, but Medicaid billing requires investments in administrative infrastructure, and the Department of Education's current capacity to provide technical assistance is limited.

Commission members endorsed several proposals recommended by staff:

- Include funding in the upcoming biennium budget to support the School-Based Mental Health Integration Pilot for two more years and direct the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) to develop performance measures for the program.
- Include funding in the upcoming biennium budget for the Department of Medical Assistance Services (DMAS) to commission a review of school-based behavioral health services, to include redesigning therapeutic day treatment (a service that was once widespread in public schools, but, as DMAS has noted in the past, has a "problematic rate and unit structure that has made it impossible for providers to deliver the service," particularly after it was moved from a fee-for-service structure into managed care).
- Bolster the ability of the Department of Education (VDOE) to provide school divisions with technical assistance with Medicaid billing.
- Direct VDOE to work with DBHDS and DMAS on a plan to deliver flexible mental health funds to school divisions; include one-time funding in the state budget to provide a bridge between the expiration of federal pandemic relief funds and the implementation of the permanent funding mechanism that would be developed by VDOE, DBHDS, and DMAS.

Implementation of Project BRAVO and Behavioral Health Redesign: As part of the Commission's ongoing monitoring of key behavioral health initiatives, staff were directed to evaluate the implementation and performance of Project BRAVO, the first phase of the state's behavioral health redesign initiative. The redesign is intended to improve access to Medicaid-funded behavioral health care services, as well as enhancing these services' quality and cost-effectiveness; the goal of improving access to community-based services through the initiative is to reduce the need for higher-intensity services. Project BRAVO included the redesign of nine behavioral health services, including services that were previously not covered by Medicaid or limited by inadequate rates. Plans to build out additional services in subsequent phases of behavioral health redesign have not moved forward. Staff review of utilization data for services covered under Project BRAVO indicates that utilization varies among services, with decreased use of some services possibly the result of increased availability of other more appropriate services, as well as changes in program requirements, such as prior authorization. There is limited data about outcomes of services, making it difficult to evaluate quality and cost-effectiveness. The staff presentation from the November 13 meeting, which includes summaries of the two reports, is available at [this link](#). The full report on school-based mental health services is available at [this link](#), and the behavioral health redesign report is available at [this link](#). The Commission's next meeting is scheduled for December 5.

VACo Contact: [Katie Boyle](#)

Joint Commission on Health Care Discusses Workforce Development, Local Health Departments



At its November 13 meeting, the Joint Commission on Health Care discussed the state's health care workforce development programs and received an update on the workgroup convened by the Virginia Department of Health, at the Commission's request, to prioritize recommendations from the Commission's 2022 study of local health departments.

Health care workforce programs: Reviewing and evaluating health care workforce development programs are ongoing aspects of the Commission's work; goals for this year included developing an inventory of programs and updating Commission members on related efforts undertaken by other entities. Commission staff cataloged 64 health-specific workforce programs in Virginia, and 24 general workforce programs that encompass health care; 42 percent of these programs receive state funding. Staff noted that evidence of effectiveness for these programs is limited, explaining that conducting evaluations of programs can be challenging, given limitations on data availability and lack of funding available for such analyses. Staff pointed to common themes in several recent studies of health care workforce needs in Virginia, including recommendations for a multi-faceted approach toward recruitment and retention (which would include pay increases, reduction in regulatory burdens, and support for employee well-being), and increased monitoring and evaluation of program outcomes. The Virginia Health Workforce Development Authority recently concluded a health care workforce study that was directed by the General Assembly; key findings included the need to decrease major barriers to recruitment and retention (including fatigue, distress, and disengagement); increase recruitment (such

as by increasing slots in training programs and shortening licensure processes); and increase wages. James L. Jenkins, Jr., Special Advisor for the Healthcare Workforce in the Governor's office, reported on the Administration's efforts to address workforce shortages, particularly in nursing and behavioral health, and highlighted recent additional investments in loan repayment and training programs, as well as efforts to reduce regulatory barriers. Slides from these presentations may be found at [this link](#).

Local health department structure and financing update: Dr. Elaine Perry, Director of the Richmond and Henrico Health Districts and chair of the workgroup convened by the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) at the request of the Commission, provided an update on workgroup discussions. VACo is participating in this workgroup, which was requested to prioritize the policy options included in the Commission's 2022 study of local health departments' structure and financing. An internal workgroup at VDH staff has proposed prioritizing (1) a requirement for all health districts to participate in the Community Health Assessment and Community Health Improvement Plan process (which VDH is working to standardize); (2) development of a state performance management process for each local health department; and (3) comparison of cooperative budget funding per capita with identified needs of local departments in order to make adjustments as additional funding is available. Other topics of discussion in the workgroup included facilitating access to clinical care; aligning staffing with public health needs; and determining the future role of local health departments. Dr. Perry updated Commission members on the results of a survey conducted by VACo, which reflected counties' interest in more regular communication with local health departments, as well as strong support for stabilizing staffing in local departments, particularly in roles that are connected to local economic development.

The presentation may be found at [this link](#).

Commission members reviewed draft study resolutions for two studies planned for 2024; the first proposes to examine models to extend health care access to vulnerable populations, such as through community paramedicine, home visiting, and community health workers, and the second would require staff to evaluate the performance of health care workforce programs. The Commission is scheduled to hold its final meeting of the year on December 6, at which time it will vote on policy options from its 2023 studies on team-based care and the prevention and treatment of obesity and eating disorders, as well as voting on studies for 2024.

VACo Contact: [Katie Boyle](#)

PUBLIC HEARINGS NOTICE

GOVERNOR'S PROPOSED 2024-2026 BIENNIAL STATE BUDGET

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN THAT THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS AND SENATE FINANCE AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEES OF THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY WILL HOLD **VIRTUAL** REGIONAL PUBLIC HEARINGS ON THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSED 2024-2026 BIENNIAL STATE BUDGET, AS FOLLOWS:

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 3, 2024

(Hearings begin at 10 a.m.)

All public hearings will be held virtually. There will be four separate virtual hearings with legislators from each region participating as follows:

Northern Virginia | Western Virginia | Hampton Roads

Central Virginia (Richmond)

Public registration to speak at one of the public hearings will occur on Tuesday, January 2, 2024. Please check either of the following websites for more information:

Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee Website (sfac.virginia.gov/)

House Appropriations Committee Website (hac.virginia.gov/)

Public Hearings will be livestreamed on the Virginia General Assembly [Website](#)

<https://virginiageneralassembly.gov/membersAndSession.php?secid=1&activesec=0#!hb=1&mainContentTabs=0>

The purpose of the hearings is to receive comments on the Governor's proposed 2024-26 biennial state budget. Those persons wishing to speak may register to speak the **day before** each virtual hearing.

Speakers will be taken in the order of registration. Each person may register only one speaker at a time and only sign-up to speak at one of the hearings. Speakers are asked to limit their comments to three minutes or less. Speakers representing groups and organizations should consolidate remarks to reduce duplication. Persons unable to attend may submit their comments electronically at https://hodspeak.house.virginia.gov/upcoming_meetings

People with disabilities may request reasonable accommodations by calling (804) 698-7480. All requests for reasonable accommodations must be received by 5 p.m., Tuesday December 26, 2023. Requested arrangements for sign language interpreters, received by December 26, will be provided via video format.



Office of Broadband

Virginia's Digital Opportunity Plan

The [Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development \(DHCD\)](#) has released the Virginia Digital Opportunity Plan for a public comment window.

The public comment window will open on November 29, 2023 and will close on December 29, 2023.

The Commonwealth of Virginia has drafted the [Digital Opportunity Plan](#) as required under the State Digital Equity Program's Notice of Funding Opportunity and Supplemental Guidance. Upon receipt and consideration of comments to this document, the Commonwealth of Virginia will submit the Final Virginia Digital Opportunity Plan for consideration to the National Telecommunications and Information Association (NTIA), including the Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

VIRTUAL INPUT SESSIONS

Wednesday, December 13, 2023 | 10 a.m. - 12 p.m.

Wednesday, December 19, 2023 | 1 p.m. - 3 p.m.

A link to the session will be sent to registrants the day before via email.

[REGISTER NOW](#)

The Virginia Digital Opportunity Plan includes critical components to effectively address broadband affordability and adoption, including laying the groundwork to effectively administer funding under implementation grant programs under the Digital Equity Act, as well as remaining non-deployment funding under the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program to address broadband affordability and adoption.

The Office of Broadband will host two virtual input sessions on December 13, 2023, at 10 a.m. and December 19, 2023, at 1 p.m.

If you have any questions, contact Office of Broadband staff at digitalopportunity@dhcd.virginia.gov.



VDSS Webinar on Proposed Alternative Allocation for State Administrative Funding (Part One)

At the direction of the State Board of Social Services, the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) has been developing a proposed alternative allocation method for state administrative funding to local departments of social services for staff and operations costs that would reflect local department caseloads, poverty, and local ability to pay. Ryan Kelly, Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Policy and Administration at VDSS, joined VACo and VML on November 28 to discuss the proposal and solicit initial feedback on the Department's recommendations. The video is below.

[VDSS PRESENTATION](#)

2024 VIRGINIA WOMEN'S MUNICIPAL LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH VIRGINIA TECH ROANOKE CENTER
AND VIRGINIA WOMEN LEADING GOVERNMENT

About the Institute

This Institute provides women in local government with the connections and tools to further develop their skills, strengthening the pipeline for women to lead communities in Virginia and beyond. The Institute is designed to:

- ★ Teach tangible and transformational leadership skills to increase self-confidence, knowledge, and ability.
- ★ Provide connection and content to strengthen leadership skills.
- ★ Create an everlasting support network among participants, past and present.
- ★ Build the pipeline of women leading government in Virginia.



Program Details

Who: The Institute will be limited to 25 women aspiring to fill leadership positions in local government. *Participants should be committed to be actively engaged and attend every session to learn from one another and from content leaders.* Participants may miss one in-person session and one virtual session, if necessary. Missing more than these two sessions will disqualify a participant from receiving the Certificate of Completion.

What: The delivery format is hybrid including six two-day in-person sessions and two virtual half-day sessions. Tuition of \$1,800 includes the opening dinner on March 20, breakfast and lunch for all in-person sessions, as well as hotel accommodations for Wednesday, March 20 and Thursday, March 21 at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center. All other accommodations, meals, and travel expenses are at the participant's expense. Participants are responsible for purchasing the book needed for the July virtual session.

When: The Institute will launch Wednesday evening, March 20, 2024, with a "Connections before Content" dinner in Roanoke. The Institute will conclude at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center on Friday, Oct. 18, 2024. Institute schedule is attached.

Where: Participants will be asked to meet regionally at a common venue with fellow participants for the virtual half-day sessions. Locations for the April, June, August, and September sessions are noted on the attached schedule. *Note: These locations are subject to change pending availability.*

Institute Curriculum

Every session will begin with an optional “pay on your own” dinner on Wednesday evenings prior to the content rich sessions on Thursdays and Fridays. This “Connection (or Reconnection) before Content” will be an opportunity to get to know one another on a more personal level and to build everlasting relationships. Following is a sampling of topics included in the curriculum:

- ★ Imagining Your Leadership Future
- ★ Know Thyself (and One Another): Personality Assessments and How to Use Your Personality Type as a Leader
- ★ Essential Skills: Budget, Finance, Strategic Planning, Council/Manager Relations
- ★ Negotiating Strategies for Women
- ★ The Leap to Leadership/Formal and Informal Leadership
- ★ Mastermind Problem-Solving



Application Process

Email a cover letter expressing why you are interested in participating in the Institute at this stage in your career as well as your current resume to Bonnie Svrcek, Institute coordinator at bsvrcek@gmail.com no later than midnight Wednesday, Jan. 3, 2024. Explain in your cover letter your career goals and how you believe the Institute will help you achieve such goals. Explain how you will use your experience to “pay it forward.” Please email Bonnie with any questions you may have prior to application.

Participants will be notified of their acceptance in the 2024 Institute no later than Monday, Jan. 15, 2024. Depending on demand, the number of participants per locality may be limited. Virginia Tech will award up to 7.2 Continuing Education Units / 72 contact hours to participants upon successful completion of the Institute requirements.

Scholarships are available to locality members of the Virginia Risk Sharing Association (VRSA) through their Risk Management Grant Funds. Contact Peter Stephenson at pstephenson@vrsa.us for details.

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Bronze (\$500-\$1,499)

Bonnie Svrcek

2023 VWMLI Graduates



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VACo 2024 LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM

For the 2024 General Assembly Session



ADOPTED BY VACo
MEMBERSHIP ON
NOVEMBER 14, 2023



**VACo
Membership
Adopts
Legislative
Program**

Thank you for your participation in the development and adoption of the [VACo 2024 Legislative Program](#).

Please take a moment to review the adopted program.

[VACo 2024 Legislative Program](#)



REGIONAL ELECTED LEADERS INITIATIVE

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You are invited to join leaders from our region's public, private and non-profit sectors at the Schar School of Policy and Government's Regional Elected Leaders Initiative (RELI) Annual Regional Leadership Awards Luncheon. Dr. Stephen Fuller, George Mason University professor emeritus and past director of the Center for Regional Analysis, will provide a stark picture of the region's economy and a call for regional leadership moving forward.

REGISTER NOW!

Virginia Water and Wastewater Rate 2023 Report is Now Available



Virginia Water and Wastewater Rate Report

Since 1989, TRC Companies has prepared and distributed an annual Virginia Water and Wastewater Rate Report. This report asks municipalities to provide information concerning monthly residential water bills as well as all wastewater-related charges included on their customers' bills. Experts at TRC analyze the data and compare it to former years in order to track fluctuations in water and wastewater use and rates in Virginia.

[Download our FREE Rate Reports →](#)

35th Annual Water & Wastewater Rate Report Highlights Key Industry Trends for Virginia Utilities

With over 250 water and wastewater providers in Virginia dedicated to serving diverse communities, navigating the benchmarking process is critical but complex. Leveraging a deep understanding of the industry and the challenges public utilities face, [TRC Companies](#) continues to spearhead the production the Virginia Water & Wastewater Rate Report to shed light on crucial industry trends and provide utilities with indispensable insights for effective decision-making.

In 2023, the 35th Annual Report found significant impacts for utilities related to rate changes. The average water rate across the Commonwealth increased by 7.2 percent in 2023 and the average sewer rate increased by 6.5 percent. Both increases were significantly higher than the previous year. Since 2012, the average water rate has increased by 3.4 percent per year and the average wastewater rate has risen by 3.6 percent per year. These increases occurred across a control group of representative utilities that allows the report to extrapolate trends across the state.

Amidst these insights, the 2023 Virginia Water & Wastewater Rate Report also provides an in-depth analysis of connection fees and capital recovery charges, giving utilities a comprehensive understanding of the broader financial landscape in which they operate.

For those seeking to delve into the comprehensive details of the 2023 Virginia Water and Wastewater Rate Report or to access previous editions, the complete reports are readily [available for download online](#). For any inquiries or further information, please reach out to us at water@trccompanies.com.



Get to know one of VACo's Premier Partners – Aetna

VACo Premier Partner Aetna believes healthier happens together. Aetna is a leading health care company that takes a holistic approach in partnering with public sector employees and their families to achieve their best health.

Dean Lynch, VACo Executive Director, and Marcus Duckworth, VP, Client Management of Aetna, explore key health benefits in areas important to the public sector.

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2023 Catalog of State and Federal Mandates on Local Governments Now Available



The Commission on Local Government has officially approved and published the much-anticipated 2023 edition of the Catalog of State and Federal Mandates on Local Governments. This resource is a result of collaborative efforts among various agencies.

The Commission's approval of the 2023 version took place on September 8, 2023, in accordance with the Code of Virginia, §15.2-2903(7), which mandates the Commission to prepare and regularly update this comprehensive catalog.

The catalog is readily accessible online, and you can explore it by visiting the following link: <https://dmz1.dhcd.virginia.gov/MandatesSearch/MandatesSearch.aspx>

The Commission values local government input and encourages you to share your comments, suggestions, and questions with the dedicated staff of the Commission on Local Government. Your feedback is crucial in ensuring that this resource remains relevant and useful for all stakeholders.

Should you have any questions or require further information about this document or any related matters, please do not hesitate to reach out to the Commission or VACo.



HIGH PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY



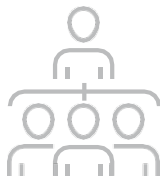
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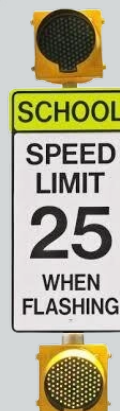


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The Virginia Association of Counties accepts employment ads in a PDF file or a link to a job site. Please include information for applying, and a link to other important information. Please do not fax your employment ad. VACo members are not charged for placing an employment ad. **The cost is \$100 per ad for non-VACo members.** VACo publishes the ad on its website and mobile app as well as the upcoming County Connections issue. If you have any questions or concerns, please email [Valerie.Russell](mailto:Valerie.Russell@vacounty.org).

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VALUE OF VACo



ADVOCACY

VACo's lobbying efforts have helped stem the tide of unfunded mandates and have saved Counties millions of dollars every year.



EDUCATION

Our educational programs offer County leaders and staff opportunities to become more effective in their communities.



MEMBERSHIP ENGAGEMENT

Some of VACo's best moments are when members convene and work to improve communities all over the Commonwealth.



BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Our business development opportunities offer savings and innovative approaches to delivering services at the County level.

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VACo exists to support county officials and to effectively represent, promote and protect the interests of counties to better serve the people of Virginia.

1207 East Main Street | Suite 300
 Richmond, VA 23219-3627
 Phone: 804.788.6652 | www.vaco.org

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