

*In the Spirit of  
Gabriel & Nan,  
Nat Turner,  
Solomon Northup,  
Madison Washington,  
John Brown,  
Mary Bowser,  
Elizabeth Van Lew,  
John Mitchell Jr.,  
Barbara Johns,  
Oliver Hill & all who  
struggle for Justice.*

# The Virginia DEFENDER

FREE



A statewide quarterly newspaper published by the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

Founded in 2005 - Now serving 16 Virginia cities and counties

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Summer / Fall 2025

## No Blood for Oil! Bring Our Sailors Home!

# NO WAR ON VENEZUELA!



On a cool, rainy day in late November, about two dozen activists, including veterans, held a protest outside the main gate of the Norfolk Naval Station. Their message was a simple one: "No War Against Venezuela!" What was really interesting, and very encouraging, was the fact that the friendly honk and thumbs-ups of active-duty folks ad civilian workers passing in and out of the gate far outnumbered the few hostile reactions. Many of the ships now in the Caribbean off the coast of Venezuela are homeported in Norfolk. Please see pages 12 and 13 for a report on the protest, information about Venezuela and an Open Letter to Norfolk sailors. The time to stop a war is before it starts. Educate yourself, think about what you read, and maybe next time you'll join us.



# Charlotte turns up the heat on ICE & CBP

By Harley Salmen

In November, Charlotte, N.C., became another target of the government's anti-immigrant terror campaign. The operation dubbed Charlotte's Web lasted from Nov. 16 to Nov. 20 and led to 425-plus people being kidnapped, according to a Department of Homeland Security spokesperson on Dec. 3.

These numbers don't begin to detail the thousands who are impacted by their loved one's disappearance and the fear and chaos that ensued in communities across Charlotte.

The presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents resulted in 30,000 students being absent from classes on Nov. 17 - more than 20% of all students enrolled in the district, according to Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

Many businesses shut down, including the beloved Manolo's Bakery, which closed its doors for the first time in 28 years because of CBP raids and concerns about community safety.

CBP claims to be targeting criminals and undocumented immigrants, yet it has largely been going after people based on their race/ethnicity and the language they speak, which has resulted in multiple U.S. citizens being detained.

It appears that CBP is continuing to build on its racist, xenophobic narrative that immigrants are dangerous, unproductive and drain "our" resources.

The people of Charlotte have shown up and shown out to send a message that ICE is not welcome in Charlotte, and that they will keep their immigrant communities safe.

After the announcement of Manolo's Bakery's closing, people gathered at the

bakery in solidarity, standing on the side of the road with signs, flags and music to show support for immigrant businesses.

Manolo's bloomed during this time into a community spot for those protesting CBP's presence in Charlotte. The bakery is just one of many businesses impacted on Charlotte's East Side. The hundreds

of people who showed up in the days following its closure were standing with all immigrant businesses and immigrant community members forced to stay in their homes to avoid the kidnappings.

The empty classrooms did not go unnoticed either. On Nov. 18, according to WBTV, nearly 1,000 students and faculty members at various schools walked out of class to protest the Charlotte's Web operation. Outside schools, parents and community members have been showing up to perform an ICE Watch at the arrival and dismissal times.

ICE Watch has been happening all

around the city, with a big focus on East and South Charlotte, as CBP & ICE were heavily targeting the immigrant communities in those areas.

An East Charlotte native and community member spoke to the Defender about their experience on ICE Watch during the operation. They shared how ICE

& CBP did not like to be watched and would tend to disperse when they were being watched by community members.

"Following [CBP] was an active way to disrupt their behavior," they said.

They also recalled how the usually lively East Charlotte

was "like a ghost town, for a good two weeks - every single international store, truck and business closed, and that's a big part of that side of town, so it just felt desolate."

While the Charlotte community has been working to keep their city safe, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department did little to protect the communities they claim to serve. City officials of-

fered heartfelt but empty words and little protection to the people of Charlotte.

Charlotte officials, including elected city council members and the Mecklenburg County sheriff, voiced that CBP had not communicated with them about their presence as of Nov. 12, only four days before CBP started its movements in Charlotte.

The confusion didn't stop there. It was reported that CBP would be closing out its Charlotte's Web operation and leaving town on Nov. 21. Mecklenburg County Sheriff Garry McFadden confirmed on Nov. 20 that the agents had left town earlier that day.

However, DHS (Department of Homeland Security) Twitter contradicted this information and stated, "Wrong. Operation Charlotte's Web isn't ending anytime soon."

While DHS is still claiming to be in Charlotte, McFadden has stood by his original statement that agents left, and community reports back up this statement.

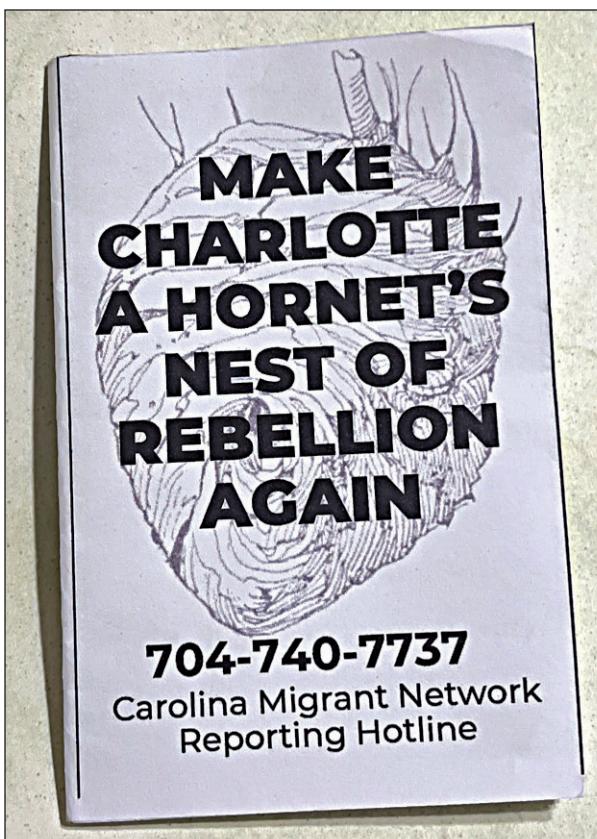
Meanwhile, ICE still remains in the area to continue, on a smaller scale, to terrorize immigrant communities.

The people of Charlotte will continue to fight to keep Charlotte safe. There are multiple ways supporters can stand in solidarity, such as supporting fundraisers to oppose CBP & ICE violence.

Two community members who need support are Miguel Harcia Martinez (gofund.me/c712e5085) and Cristobal Mallos (gofund.me/22b54226b).

As CBP continues its path of terror in New Orleans, we have learned from all these cities that what has kept people safe is turning into a community.

One thing is for sure: Charlotte has not cowered in fear, but has shown that ICE melts under Southern heat.



## Do you want to fight for Freedom, Justice & Equality? JOIN THE DEFENDERS!

### VIRGINIA DEFENDERS for Freedom, Justice & Equality

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The Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality is an all-volunteer organization of Virginians working for the survival of our communities through education and social justice projects.

We started out in June 2002. Many of us had relatives in the Richmond City Jail or state prisons and were concerned about the physical conditions of these institutions.

As we worked around these issues, we learned more and more about the connections between jails, jobs, poverty, racism, sexism, class, war and political representation. We

began to organize around these issues as well.

We now sponsor the Virginia Defender quarterly newspaper and the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project and are affiliated with the Virginia Prison Justice Network, which we co-founded.

If you agree with the principles below and want to work to make these ideals a reality, we invite you to join us. Together, we can make a real difference in the life of our communities.

#### WHAT WE BELIEVE

##### We believe in Freedom

We believe that all people must be free to develop to their full potential as human beings. We must be free from hunger, from preventable diseases, from homelessness, from ignorance. We must be free to work and to provide for ourselves and our families. We must be free to pursue our education and to develop ourselves culturally and spiritually. We must be free from fear of the arbitrary use of police power and from the physical and cultural attacks of

white-supremacist organizations. Women must be free from physical, cultural and emotional oppression. LGBTQ+ people must be free from all forms of oppression. Children must be free from dangers like lead poisoning, asthma and sexual exploitation. Our youths must be free both from police harassment and the mindless violence of the streets. We must all be free from unjust wars fought in the interest of the wealthy few at the expense of the struggling many.

##### We believe in Justice

We believe that every human being has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And we believe that these rights are meaningless unless we also have the right to a job at a living wage, to decent housing, to adequate health care, to a meaningful education. We believe that all people have the right to stand equally before the law, to equal and fair treatment by the police, by the court system and in jails and prisons. And we believe that the death penalty is the ultimate exercise in injustice.

##### We believe in Equality

We live in the richest country in the world.

But it's a country that owes its tremendous wealth to the barbaric oppression of Black labor on a historic scale, the theft of American Indian and Mexican lands, the cruel exploitation of Asian labor and the labor of waves of poor European immigrants.

This country does not belong to the wealthy few who have claimed it for their own. As human beings, we all have an equal right to its resources. As descendants of those whose blood, sweat and tears paid cruelly for its development, we have a right to collective reparations. And as people who struggle every day with ongoing inequality, we have the right to affirmative action.

We believe that for any one of us to be free, we must all be free. We believe that for any one of us to have justice, we must all have justice. We believe that equality for anyone is impossible without equality for everyone.

As members of The Defenders, we pledge ourselves to defend our community, its men, its women and especially its children, from all forms of oppression.

We pledge to fight for a world where all people can live in dignity, freedom and peace.

## news u can use

**Free 24/7 advice from a nurse**

It's 3 a.m., your child wakes up and says they aren't feeling well and you don't know what to do? "CONSULT A NURSE" is a free, 24/7 hotline that provides professional advice on health issues. Call 833-866-6727.

**988 for mental health support**

Feeling overwhelmed? Maybe even suicidal? Thanks to federal funding, people in need of mental health support can call 988, the number that connects the caller to the National Suicide Prevention Hotline.

**Free legal advice**

Legal Aid offices across Virginia offer pro bono (free) help for low-income individuals facing civil (noncriminal) legal problems. Call 866-534-5243 to reach your local Legal Aid office and find out if you're eligible.

**\$35 consultation with an attorney**

If you think you have a civil or criminal issue that may require the services of a lawyer, you can call the Virginia Lawyer Referral Service for an up-to-30-minute consultation for a prepaid fee of \$35. Statewide, call 800-552-7977, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.



Photo by Ana Edwards

When it first opened 87 years ago, the Henrico Theatre at 305 E. Nine Mile Road was the most modern movie palace in the area. Today it is still a hidden gem for movie goers -- and quite a bargain at just \$1 for admission.

## In Henrico County: A hidden gem for movie lovers

By Phil Wilayto

There's a hidden gem in the Highland Springs neighborhood in Eastern Henrico County that we'd like to shine a little light on.

It's a movie theater that, like the beloved Byrd in Richmond's Carytown district, shows second-run movies, but at an even lower price: \$1.00.

That's right, one buck.

And not only is admission just a dollar, but so is the popcorn, soda and candy.

Talk about a cheap date.

And the place is no dive. The designer of this lovely, two-story art

deco theater located at 305 E. Nine Mile Road was Edward F. Sinnott, the noted Richmond architect (1890-1974) who also designed many other area theaters, including the Robinson in Richmond's Church Hill, as well as many local schools, banks, medical offices, office buildings and parks.

(Fun fact: One of the theater's two original owners had previously built the Byrd, which opened in 1928.)

Henrico Theatre opened as a movie palace on April 25, 1938. At that time, according to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, "... it was the most prominent and architecturally sophisticated theater in the Richmond area, despite its then-rural location."

It also had air conditioning, a rarity at the time.

Tickets back then were a quarter for adults and a dime for children.

The building, which was designated as a bomb shelter during World War II, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

After falling on hard times, the privately owned theater was closed in 1996. Three years later it was purchased from the Horne family by Henrico County, which spent \$5.8 million in renovations, reopening it to the public in 2007.

One really nice thing about the theater is that everyone seems to feel welcome there. (Or we wouldn't be recommending it.)

Besides movies, the 400-seat theater also hosts live events and is available for rental, along with an upstairs meeting room.

So check out the movie and event schedule at [henrico.gov/rec/places/henrico-theatre](http://henrico.gov/rec/places/henrico-theatre). We'd be surprised if you don't see something you like.

And if you do go, tell 'em the Defender sent you.

## Richmond Reproductive Freedom Project

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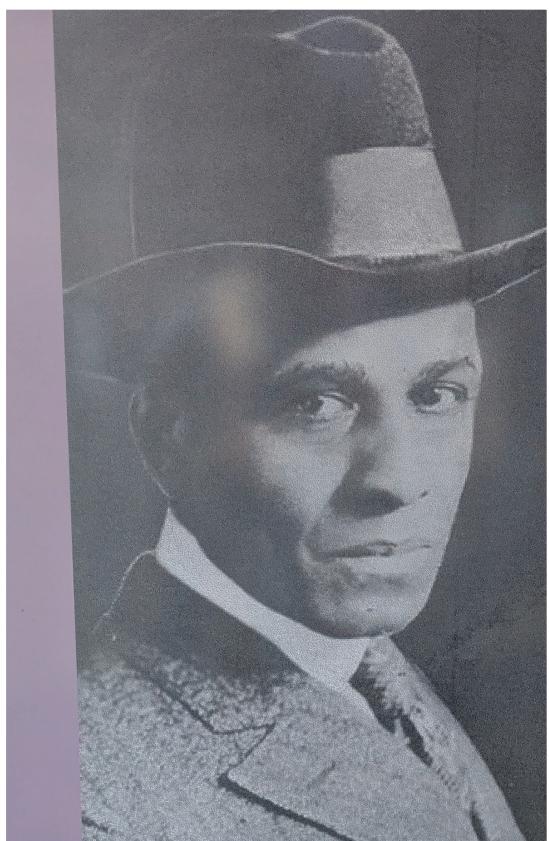
You'll be glad you did!



## Gilpin Court children honor neighborhood namesake

Members of the Charles S. Gilpin Community Farm Youth Conservation Corps gathered on Sunday, Nov. 16, to celebrate the unveiling of banner-style murals of Charles Gilpin, the world-renowned actor of the early 20th century for whom the Gilpin Court neighborhood is named. The event was organized by Community Unity in Action. At right is CUIA Co-chair Art Burton, a key organizer of the event.

Photo by Ana Edwards



SIDNEY GILPIN 1878-1930

On Nov. 20, 1878, Charles S. Gilpin grew up here in Jackson Ward. He apprenticed at the Richmond Opera House until he joined a traveling show at age 18. He grew his acting career in New York City performing in African American theaters and becoming one of the most highly regarded actors of the 1920's.

## Charles Sidney Gilpin

This is a photo of the banner-style mural that was unveiled at the Gilpin Court ceremony described above. Charles Sidney Gilpin, a groundbreaking stage actor in Canada and the United States, was born on Nov. 20, 1878, in Richmond, Va. Among many other distinctions, he debuted the lead role of Brutus Jones in the 1920 premiere of Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones." In 1920, he was the first Black person to receive The Drama League's annual award as one of 10 people who had done the most that year for U.S. theater. He also was honored at the White House by President Warren G. Harding.

Photo by Ana Edwards

## Ifa Festival 2025

Staff report

Participants from around the world attended IFA Festival 2025 on July 18 at the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground,

The festival featured an Egun Masquerade, libations, offerings of flowers, live performances and a Black History lecture by Sacred Ground Project Chair Ana Edwards.

The Ifa Festival is an annual event organized by the Obafemi Institute of the Divine Universal Study of Ifa (OIDSI) and hosted by its founder and Babalawo, Chief Oluwo Obafemi Fayemi Epega. Learn more at: [obafemi.org/about](http://obafemi.org/about)



**The Virginia Defender**  
**endorses**  
**Charlie Schmidt**  
**for House of Delegates**  
**District 77**

The Virginia Defender newspaper is proud to formally endorse the candidacy of our good friend and ally, attorney Charlie Schmidt, who has announced his candidacy for District 77 of the Virginia House of Delegates.

The District 77 seat became vacant when Del. Michael Jones resigned from the House of Delegates after winning the Democratic firehouse primary to run for the state senate seat formerly held by Ghazala Hashmi, who was elected lieutenant governor in the Nov. 4 Virginia election.

We urge all our readers in District 77 to vote for Charlie in the “firehouse primary”

to be held Sunday, Dec. 14. There are two voting locations: Richmond High School for the Arts, 4314 Crutchfield St., Richmond, 23225; and Providence Middle School, 900 Starlight Lane, Chesterfield, 23234.

Charlie is a former ACLU attorney, longtime community activist and proud union member of SEIU Local 512. We have known and worked with Charlie for many years and have always been impressed with his willingness to give of his time, energy and considerable skills in the pursuit of justice for poor and working-class people

and all those oppressed by poverty, racism, sexism, anti-LGBTQ+ bigotry.

In the current period, Charlie has particularly distinguished himself by coming to the defense of the immigrant community and targeted political activists, leading him to found the Richmond Community Legal Fund

Many candidates tell you what they believe and what they plan to do if elected. Charlie has a solid record of decades of dedicated work in the service of causes we hold dear.

In his press release announcing his candidacy, Charlie describes himself as a

“progressive Democrat.” The Virginia Defender takes an independent view of politics evaluating each candidate on their own record and merits. In general, we reject both major parties, understanding them to be two wings of the same bird - a capitalist vulture. Our endorsement of Charlie shouldn’t be seen as a reevaluation of that position, but simply an endorsement of one progressive candidate for one specific office.

Supporters can learn more about Charlie’s campaign and get involved by visiting his official website at:

**charlie4va.com**



Photo by Christopher Walker

Striking workers and supporters hold a protest Nov. 13 outside the Starbucks at Broad and Strawberry streets in Richmond.

## 'No contract, no coffee!' Starbucks on strike

By Christopher Walker

For the second holiday season in a row, Starbucks workers are back on strike - this time, indefinitely.

On Nov. 13, outside the Richmond Starbucks at West Broad and Strawberry streets, a large crowd of Starbucks workers and their supporters filled the entrance and adjacent sidewalk. Between loud chants that included "No contract, no coffee!" and "What's disgusting? Union busting!" baristas explained why they had chosen to begin their strike: low wages, understaffing and Starbucks' refusal to negotiate with their union.

In 2021, Starbucks workers in Buffalo, N.Y., voted to form a union. Starbucks workers around the country followed suit, voting to unionize and form Starbucks Workers United (SBWU) - including nine stores in the Richmond area.

Under federal law, Starbucks is now required to "collectively bargain" - negotiate a contract with the workers who won the vote to unionize. Thus far, though, Starbucks has refused to do so.

Last year, Starbucks' unwillingness to take the workers' union seriously, among a litany of other grievances from workers, prompted SBWU to undertake a national, one-day Unfair Labor Practices strike on Christmas Eve. A handful of unionized stores in the Richmond area participated in this strike, drawing notable community support.

2025 marked another year of Starbucks failing to come to a collective bargaining agreement with its workers. The company added insult to injury with its hiring of new CEO Brian Niccol, whose "Back to Starbucks"

campaign has included layoffs, store closures and additional rules on the job for baristas, but no union contract.

This winter, unionized Starbucks workers voted to embark on another Unfair Labor Practices strike. This strike does not have a designated end date. The workers hope that going on strike indefinitely during the critical holiday sales period will put significant economic pressure on Starbucks and bring it to the bargaining table.

The strike has garnered significant international attention, and local unions and political organizations including SEIU, Richmond DSA and PSL all attended the opening picket line and rally at the Broad and Strawberry St location in central Richmond.

A strike captain reported they were pleased with the turnout and support at the rally, as workers will be counting on the support of those willing and able to attend rallies and contribute to their strike fund during the extended work stoppage.

Workers certainly have a long and difficult struggle ahead of them, as Starbucks has invested its millions - and likely will continue to do so - into attempts to prevent workers from collectively organizing for better pay and working conditions.

Against this backdrop, one worker's testimony stood out: They said that, in a particularly dark time in their life, their co-workers and SBWU had given them hope that they could win wages and benefits that could provide for a healthy and financially secure life.

Starbucks workers have identified that their individual needs can be met by fighting together, and this strike marks another courageous step in their ongoing struggle with their employer.

## Mom's Siam: NLRB victory, but still no back pay

By Christopher Walker

In our last issue, the Defender reported on the court victory of workers at Mom's Siam, a Thai food restaurant in Richmond's Carytown.

The workers had lodged and won an Unfair Labor Practices (ULP) complaint against the owner of Mom's Siam for firing them for union organizing at work - a direct violation of federal law.

The judge with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), ruling in the workers' favor, ordered the restaurant's owner to pay back pay to all nine employees named in the complaint, and also ruled that eight of the nine must be offered their jobs back.

Well, what happened next?

Nothing, so far. The Defender spoke this December with one of the workers involved in the organizing and the successful ULP case, who shared that they have yet to receive any back pay from Mom's Siam. The NLRB shared a document with the workers with instructions for calculating back pay, but has taken no further steps to secure the pay.

The former Mom's Siam employee explained that the delay in receiving the back pay was a direct result of President Donald Trump's decision to fire NLRB Chair Gwynne Wilcox, the first Black woman to serve as an NLRB chair. Because of this firing, later deemed legal by the U.S. Supreme Court, the NLRB lacks the quorum, or required number of members, to operate and enforce its ruling in the Mom's Siam case.

In December 2024, former President Joe Biden and Senate Democrats failed to

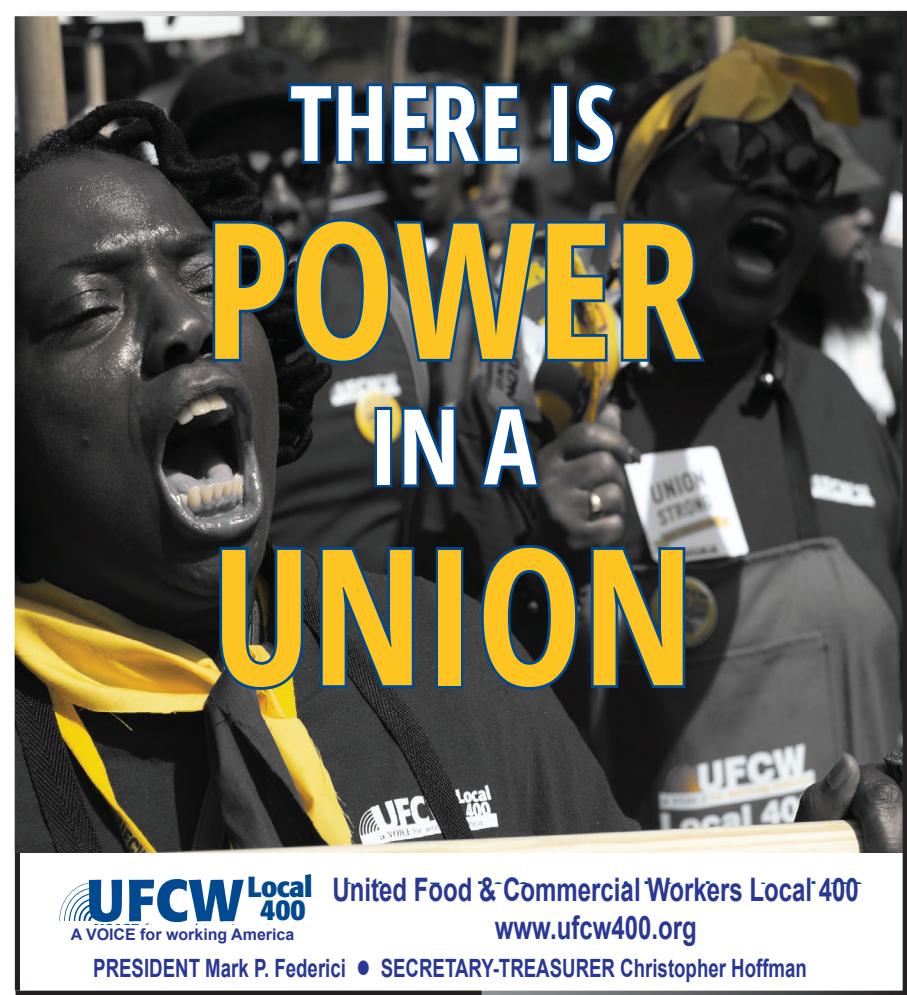
confirm their ostensibly pro-labor NLRB chair candidate, Lauren McFerran. This created the circumstances for Trump's firing of Wilcox, leaving the board without a quorum, and therefore without the power to claim back pay from Mom's Siam for the workers.

The former Mom's Siam employee said the frustration of the organizing workers was mixed with the working-class reality of their lives. All of the workers have found new jobs and have done their best to move on in the absence of justice. They keep in touch via group chat, but none have heard anything from the Mom's Siam owner.

Union organizing efforts and ongoing struggles like the one at Mom's Siam illustrate how workers face challenges well beyond those they can beat in individual workplaces. The Trump administration is well aware that its firing of Wilcox prevents the NLRB from enforcing labor law and knows the effects this will have on workers across the country. From small businesses to the highest levels of government, workers must take on individuals and groups who act aggressively and antagonistically towards worker power.

This would be a good time to remember that the federal government created the NLRB in the 1930s as a result of mass, national worker unrest and collective activism.

Grassroots labor organizing, the kind the Mom's Siam workers took on, is a good first step toward building the worker power necessary to demand and get what workers want and need.



## Shelf Life Books offers some hard organizing lessons

Staff report

Shelf Life Books in Richmond's Carytown offers a look at the difficult path workers face when organizing for better pay and working conditions.

In June 2024, workers at Shelf Life Books, described by its owners as the largest independent bookstore in Richmond, announced they had chosen to form a union. The workers also shared that store ownership had chosen to voluntarily recognize their union, and that workers had decided to affiliate with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union. UFCW has helped workers unionize at several independent bookstores across the U.S., so the path to a union at Shelf Life looked promising.

This past summer, however, a reporter from the Defender learned that formal unionization had run into several roadblocks.

Even after a union is recognized by an employer or by an employee vote facilitated by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), workers and bosses must agree to a contract that dictates rules for pay, benefits and working conditions.

This contract, known as a collective bargaining agreement, ensures that workers can count on the concessions they have won from their employers being respected by force of law. It was at this stage that the union drive stalled, one worker said.

Many of the concessions that the contract negotiations had produced had already been put into place by the owners, while the prospect of union dues did not appeal to many part-time employees with short weekly hours. Further, the Shelf Life employee said there were some problems with the negotiations themselves.

In combination with these factors and the departure from Shelf Life of many employees who had formed the nucleus of the unionization effort, the Shelf Life Union was not formalized with a collective bargaining agreement.

On the one hand, this story shows just how difficult labor organizing can be. Legal and bureaucratic pitfalls put a serious distance between workers who want to form a union and the legal certification of that union. Even when workers want a union - and the boss concedes - many workers still struggle to get a collective bargaining agreement signed.

On the other hand, the Shelf Life workers' fight for respect and compensation from their employer wasn't fought in vain. Even if their efforts did not result in a conventional union contract, the bookstore employee said, the pressure the workers placed on the shop owners by speaking out and acting collectively prompted their bosses to improve staffing and employee working conditions.

Shelf Life workers can inspire Richmond workers to start - or stay in - the fight to take a greater share of the value they create at their jobs, despite the ups and downs that that effort may take.



# A Call for a General Strike!

**Our country is facing a historic crisis. We are rapidly being driven into a total dictatorship that will only serve the wealthy few while the rest of us lose all our rights and sink further into poverty.**

Protests and court cases are important and we should keep them up, but by themselves they won't be enough. Not this time. **We need to hit Donald Trump, Elon Musk and all the other billionaires who back them where it really matters: their money.**

If all of us stop work for just one day, it would cost the billionaires billions in profits. And if we don't buy anything for that one day, that would cost them billions more. And if we hold massive protests on that day, it would demonstrate our resolve to keep going until we win.

If one day doesn't work, we go out for two days. Then a week. Then a month. Then as long as it takes. This will take a lot of organizing, but we can do it. And the alternative is to accept the loss of all

liberties and any hope for a decent future for ourselves and our children.

Our demands will have to be worked out democratically, but at the very minimum we should call for the immediate cancellation of all executive orders the Trump administration has issued since taking office.

**We call on the unions, civil rights and religious organizations, student groups and all pro-people movements to come together and organize a General Strike: No work, no school, no buying anything. Make use of the power we know we already have if we all just join together.**

When we reach an impressive number of organizations signing on to this resolution, it will be presented to unions across Virginia, asking them to promote the call for a General Strike to all national unions. And we're sharing this Call with activists in other states to promote a national grassroots upsurge of support.

**Please raise the following resolution with any organizations you belong to and ask them to endorse.**

## ENDORSEMENT FORM FOR THE CALL FOR A GENERAL STRIKE!

**Our organization supports the growing call for a General Strike: No work, no school, no buying anything until all executive orders issued by the Trump administration since taking office are canceled.**

Name, mailing & email address of the organization \_\_\_\_\_

Name of person reporting the endorsement \_\_\_\_\_

Position of this person in the organization \_\_\_\_\_

**Return form to: Defenders, PO Box 23202, Richmond, VA 23223 or email the endorsement to: DefendersFJE@hotmail.com.**

**TO ENDORSE ONLINE:**  
<https://bit.ly/strike-endorse>

This Call was initiated by the  
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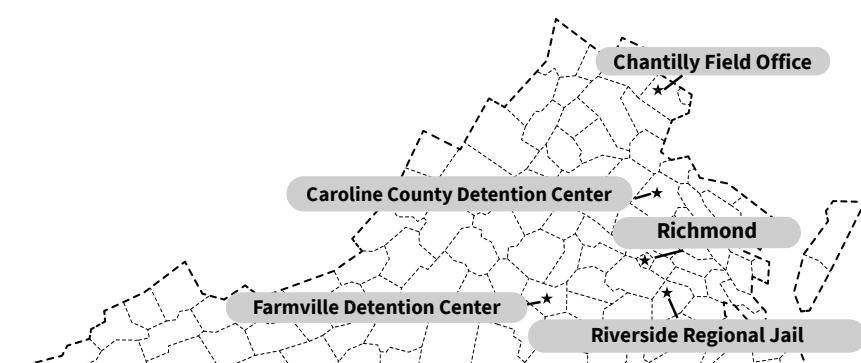
an all-volunteer community organization founded in 2002 to work for the survival of our communities through education and social justice projects.

Publisher of **The Virginia Defender**. ([virginiadefender.org](http://virginiadefender.org))

**OR**



# no hay fronteras en la lucha de los obreros



MAP OF CENTERS THAT HOLD IMMIGRANTS IN VA IN RELATION TO RICHMOND  
MAPA DE LOS CENTROS QUE OLOJAN INMIGRANTES EN VIRGINIA EN RELACIÓN A SU UBICACIÓN CON RICHMOND

## Where are immigrants taken after being kidnapped?

By Fern Diaz-Castro

Virginia has two detention centers used solely to hold people kidnapped by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Farmville Detention Center in Farmville, Va., can hold more than 700 men and has averaged 718 daily from January through November of this year, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), a data gathering, research and distribution organization at Syracuse University.

That same data indicates that, during the same period, the Caroline Detention Facility in Bowling Green, Va., averaged 353 men and women daily.

Farmville has faced accusations of human rights violations, including racially motivated abuse, brutality, and medical neglect. In October, people detained there reported worms in their food and threats of losing commissary access for speaking out.

Farmville had been operated by Abyon LLC. This July, the facility was sold for \$67 million to CoreCivic, Inc., one of the country's largest for-profit prison, jail and detention contractors. The company has faced accusations of forced labor practices, inhuman conditions in their facilities and human and civil rights violations.

Apart from Farmville and Caroline, various jails in Virginia also have volunteered to hold people for ICE. For example, a contract obtained by the Richmond Times-Dispatch and ABC News 8 shows that in May 2025 the Riverside Regional Jail in Prince George's County

agreed to hold people detained by ICE. The facility will receive federal funding for this purpose and will be reimbursed daily for each person detained.

The payment amounts and other details were redacted from the document.

Since November 2024, Riverside's superintendent has been Jeffrey N. Dillman, the former Chief of Health Services Operations for the Virginia Department of Corrections. VADOC has been a frequent target of accusations of providing poor health care for Virginia prisoners.

Due to a rapid increase this year in ICE kidnappings in Washington, D.C., and Virginia, detention centers and jails aren't the only facilities holding people captive. An ICE field office in Chantilly, Va., faced public scrutiny after reports of mistreatment. According to the ACLU, ICE was "... holding up to 80 people in a single room for more than a week at a time with no access to a lawyer, medical care, or even basic hygiene."

The increase in detentions has also led to discussions about expanding ICE facilities. For example, the ACLU is currently suing ICE for withholding records of potential expansion of immigration detention centers in Virginia following ICE's failure to respond to their FOIA request.

This came after ICE submitted a Request of Information (ROF) regarding facilities for single adults with a capacity of 1,000 to 1,500 beds, located within a two-hour drive of Richmond International Airport.

## ¿A dónde son llevados los inmigrantes después de ser secuestrados?

Por Fern Diaz-Castro

Virginia tiene dos centros de detención utilizados únicamente para retener a personas secuestradas por el Servicio de Inmigración y Control de Aduanas (ICE, por sus siglas en inglés).

El Centro de Detención de Farmville en Farmville, Virginia, puede albergar a más de 700 hombres y ha promediado 718 personas diarias desde enero hasta noviembre de este año, según Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), una organización de recopilación, investigación y distribución de datos en la Universidad de Syracuse.

Esos mismos datos indican que, durante el mismo período, la Instalación de Detención de Caroline en Bowling Green, Virginia, promedió 353 hombres y mujeres diarios.

Farmville ha enfrentado acusaciones de violaciones de derechos humanos, incluyendo abuso motivado por razones raciales, brutalidad y negligencia médica. En octubre, las personas detenidas allí informaron sobre gusanos en sus alimentos y amenazas de perder el acceso a la tienda de comisaría por reportarlo.

Farmville había sido operado por Abyon LLC. En julio de este año, el centro de detención fue vendido por 67 millones de dólares a CoreCivic, Inc., uno de los mayores contratistas privados de prisiones, cárceles y centros de detenciones para inmigrantes del país.

La empresa se ha enfrentado a acusaciones de prácticas de trabajo forzado, condiciones inhumanas en sus instalaciones y violaciones de los derechos humanos y civiles.

Además de Farmville y Caroline, diversas cárceles en Virginia también se han ofrecido voluntariamente para detener a personas para ICE. Por ejemplo, un contrato obtenido por el Richmond Times-Dispatch y ABC News 8 muestra que en mayo de 2025

la Cárcel Regional Riverside en el Condado de Prince George acordó retener a personas detenidas por ICE. La instalación recibirá fondos federales para este propósito y será reembolsada diariamente por cada persona detenida. La cantidad de pago y otros detalles fueron eliminados del documento.

Desde noviembre de 2024, el superintendente de Riverside ha sido Jeffrey N. Dillman, el ex Jefe de Operaciones de Servicios de Salud del Departamento de Correcciones de Virginia. VADOC ha sido un objetivo frecuente de acusaciones por proporcionar atención médica deficiente a los prisioneros de Virginia.

Debido a un aumento rápido este año en los secuestros por parte de ICE en Washington, D.C., y Virginia, los centros de detención y cárceles no son las únicas instalaciones que mantienen a personas cautivas. Una oficina de campo del ICE en Chantilly, Virginia, enfrentó escrutinio público tras informes de malos tratos. Según la ACLU, ICE estaba "... manteniendo hasta 80 personas en una sola habitación durante más de una semana a la vez sin acceso a un abogado, atención médica, ni siquiera higiene básica."

El aumento en las detenciones también ha generado discusiones sobre la ampliación de las instalaciones de ICE. Por ejemplo, la ACLU está demandando actualmente a ICE por retener registros sobre la posible expansión de centros de detención de inmigrantes en Virginia, tras la falta de respuesta de ICE a su solicitud bajo la Ley de Libertad de Información (FOIA, por sus siglas en inglés). Esto ocurrió después de que ICE presentara una Solicitud de Información (ROF) sobre instalaciones para adultos con una capacidad de 1,000 a 1,500 camas, ubicadas a dos horas en auto del Aeropuerto Internacional de Richmond.

### DEFENDERS SUPPORTER PROGRAM



The Defenders Supporter Program is for friends who want to support our work on an ongoing basis. Make a **monthly pledge** - as little as \$1 - or as much as you can afford. Your donation goes directly into the organizing.

#### HOW TO JOIN

Visit [DefendersFJE.blogspot.com](http://DefendersFJE.blogspot.com) or scan the QR code. Click "Donate" on the right or open the menu (mobile). Enter the amount you want to donate. Select "General Support" in the dropdown. Check the box "Make this a monthly donation".

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# Richmond rally demands elected officials protect the immigrant community - or the people will!

## Staff report

RICHMOND, VA, Aug. 11 -- A multiracial crowd of more than 150 people gathered today in front of Richmond City Hall to demand that city and state officials take a stronger stand against ICE operations in the city.

The press conference and rally, hosted by the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality and endorsed by a range of immigrant advocacy organizations, announced a list of demands that included prosecuting masked people who abduct residents without identifying themselves as law enforcement.

Endorsing organizations included Free Them All VA; New Virginia Majority; Virginia Immigrants for Life, Liberation, Autonomy & Solidarity (VILLAS); Virginia Muslim Civic League; Virginia Coalition for Human Rights; and the Rev. Rodney Hunter, Pastor, Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church.

Defender Fern Diaz-Castro opened the press conference with welcoming remarks and an explanation of the purpose of the event. Then Ana Edwards, chair of the Defenders' Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, read a statement from 21-year-old Ricardo Martinez-Cantarero, who was abducted on July 30 as he left his home in Southwood Apartments on the city's South Side to go to his job at a nearby construction site.

Masked, plainclothed ICE agents in unmarked vehicles boxed in Ricardo's car, smashed his driver-side window, dragged him out of his vehicle and took him away. Within three days he had been deported back to his home country of Honduras, which he had left at the age of 16 after his life had twice been threatened.

According to his family, Ricardo, who was in this country legally, had missed an immigration appointment of which he was unaware.

Diaz-Castro then read the rally demands, which previously had been sent to Richmond Mayor Danny Avula, Richmond Police Chief Rick Edwards, Richmond Sheriff Antoinette Irving, members of the Richmond City Council and other local elected officials.

The demands were:

- Keep ICE out of Richmond by passing and enforcing laws banning any coordination between local agencies and ICE.
- Defend our communities from invasive surveillance technology and the brutal policing committed by ICE.
- Provide legal support for immigrants who have been detained and financial support for their families.
- Stop expansions of detention centers and close existing ones.

"It is simply not enough for politicians to hold a press conference condemning actions taken by ICE without tangible



Photo by Phil Wilaytp

**A multiracial crowd of more than 150 people came out Aug. 1 for a press conference and rally in front of Richmond City Hall to demand that city officials do more to protect the area's immigrant communities.**

plans to back it up," Diaz-Castro told the crowd. "We need to see elected officials take concrete measures to protect all community members."

And, she added, "If elected officials won't protect us - we will!"

The full list of demands presented at the press conference follows this story.

Other speakers at the rally were Josue Castillo of New Virginia Majority; Gustavo Espinosa with Villas Virginia Immigrants for Life, Liberation, Autonomy, & Solidarity, or VILLAS; and the Rev. Rodney Hunter, pastor of Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church, a historically Black congregation on the city's East Side.

Chants like "No Justice, No Peace!" repeatedly rang out during the rally, as drivers of passing vehicles, including work trucks and city buses, honked their horns in solidarity.

Security at the rally was provided by the Virginia Defenders.

The event drew a wide range of media, including all three local television stations, Virginia Public Media, Virginia Mercury, Style Weekly, Commonwealth Times and independent photographers Brian Palmer and Jay Paul.

The event was livestreamed and can be viewed at the Instagram page for virginiadefendernews.

According to the Richmond Times-Dispatch, from Jan. 20 when Donald Trump took office through June 26, ICE arrested at least 3,300 people in Virginia. Most were of people with no prior criminal record.

As reported by the Virginia Mercury, Gov. Glenn Youngkin in February "ordered state police and the Department of Corrections to cooperate with ICE on detainer requests and information sharing, a move his administration said would help 'remove violent criminals from our communities.'"

Further, Youngkin has ordered the National Guard to assist ICE operations in

the state.

## The full demands the Defenders sent to local and state politicians and officials:

### 1. We need to pass policies banning all local collaboration with ICE.

City Council must pass legislation that makes it illegal for police or any city agency to coordinate with ICE. We have seen other communities in the state do this. In late 2024, for example, Arlington updated its 2022 Trust Policy to strengthen protections for immigrant communities, after data showed immigrants feared calling 911. Their document was flexible enough to be updated in May 2025, in response to continued change in enforcement and the impact on public safety. Richmond can and must show the same commitment to public safety for all our residents.

### 2. We need to ban masked and unidentified policing.

The Richmond City government must declare it illegal for people who are in plain clothes, in unmarked cars, and wearing masks to kidnap anyone, whether or not they have a warrant. It too must be illegal for law enforcement to conceal their identities by removing badges or masking faces. Richmond must also pass policies preventing arrests without judicial warrants, transfers to other jurisdictions and deportations without due process and a fair trial. Judges need to be supported in creating fair decisions that protect our community, and officers who stalk and detain without a warrant and without identifying themselves must be prosecuted.

### 3. We need to ensure that Richmond does not renegotiate any contract with Flock surveillance cameras.

Flock technology passively surveils

public space, collecting identifying data like vehicles, travel patterns and traveler identities and "high-crime" neighborhood dynamics — without requiring a warrant, and without making data collected public. This surveillance empowers police to act without accountability and saves vulnerable information designed to abuse our communities. We demand transparency.

### 4. We need to ensure legal and financial support for those detained.

City officials must use their influence and relationships to secure quality, rapid legal assistance for detained community members. This requires ongoing, genuine partnerships with immigrant communities — and prioritizing the needs and demands of those most directly impacted. The Richmond city government must also provide resources for families who have lost their breadwinner due to an ICE kidnapping or deportation.

### 5. We need to shut down all detention centers in Virginia.

We call on City Council members, state delegates and senators and U.S. representatives and senators to visit detention centers like Farmville, speak with detained individuals, and take action to stop the expansion of detention facilities and close the current existing facilities permanently.

### 6. We need to accompany community members to immigration court.

Elected local and state representatives must accompany Richmond residents to immigration court hearings to protect against ICE kidnappings and ensure public accountability during proceedings. We also need our city to fight for those who live and work here, and work to free those detained. We want all of our community to always come home.

### 7. We need sustainable sources of funding for the groups that have always filled in the gaps between our immigrant communities and local government.

Institutions like the Sacred Heart Community Center have always stepped up to bridge the gaps of access in our community to un- and under-documented community members, offering critical services like language training and GED classes as well as access to legal clinics. These safe spaces make our whole community safer, connecting people to community by providing dignity to those unrepresented in our local government. Protect and fund sanctuary spaces.

### 8. If elected officials won't protect us — we will.

If our city and state leaders fail to act, we demand that all Richmond residents step up and protect our neighbors from detention, deportation, and police violence.

We have no other choice.

## no hay fronteras en la lucha de los obreros

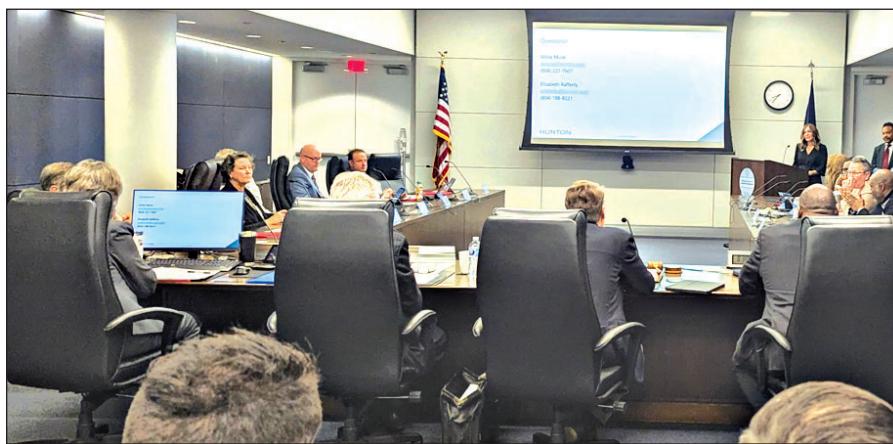


Photo by:Ana Edwards

**Members of the Capital Region Airport Commission meet on Oct. 28. A representative of one of the airlines contracted to transport immigrants out of Richmond International Airport was a no-show, despite having agreed to answer questions at the meeting.**

## RIC: A major hub for deportation flights

By Phil Wilayto

Until recently, few people in the Greater Richmond area knew their local airport is being used as a major hub for transporting immigrants from ICE detention centers to major centers from which the detainees are eventually deported.

According to reports in The New York Times, and more detailed reporting in the online Henrico Citizen, Richmond International Airport has seen scores of such flights this year as part of the Trump administration's war on immigrants.

In a story dated Sept. 25, Henrico Citizen reporter Dina Weinstein described the activity in chilling detail.

"Hidden in plain sight, behind the

Richmond Jet Center and less than a mile from the Richmond International Airport terminal, throngs of shackled people have been loaded onto airplanes with no attributed owner about 80 separate times so far this year, according to a human rights organization and Citizen observations.

"Human Rights First reports that those people then have in many cases been flown (either directly or indirectly) to the country's largest U.S. Immigration Customs Enforcement hub in Alexandria, Louisiana, where more than 1,000 deportation flights from cities throughout the U.S. have landed since January."

Central to the Richmond airport operation is support provided by the Richmond Jet Center, a family owned and

## On Trump banning immigrants from 19 Black & Brown countries

By Phil Wilayto

On Nov. 27, "Thanksgiving Day," a U.S. holiday supposedly dedicated to honoring friendship between the Indigenous peoples of North America and English immigrants to their lands, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) issued new restrictions against people trying to move to the United States.

The restrictions apply to people from 19 countries, all of which are in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

This action supposedly was taken in response to the attack, allegedly by an immigrant from Afghanistan, on two members of the West Virginia National Guard assigned to patrol the streets of the country's capital.

The Trump administration is claiming that the alleged shooter, a former member of an elite CIA-led military unit in Afghanistan, was "radicalized" after being allowed to enter the U.S.

New information is now being reported that there was no "radicalization." Instead, the suspect was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), likely caused by his experiences in his home country and his inability to find work in

the U.S. sufficient to care for his wife and five children.

Like many of Trump's policies, this one has nothing to do with the reasons being claimed. Instead, the entire campaign of attacking immigrants is designed to rid the country of anyone who isn't "white." It is a profoundly racist policy that aims to "return" the country to something it has never been: an all-white, right-wing, Christian society.

Those who control a country built on land stolen from the Indigenous peoples, worked by stolen African labor and enriched by predatory foreign policy have no moral right to prevent others from moving here - certainly not those from countries that have been devastated by U.S. economic and military actions.

It is encouraging that polls now show that the majority of people here do not support Trump's immigration attacks, leading growing numbers to come out onto the streets to defend those targeted by the government.

Hopefully, that movement will grow until all our people - from whatever land they come from - can live here in peace, justice and equality.

operated company that, according to its website, provides "... a range of services for private and commercial aircraft, including a full range of ground support assistance for all types of general and commercial aviation aircraft."

Richmond Jet Center partners with another company, Aero Industries, that handles maintenance and storage. Both companies are located at 5745 Huntsman Road, near the airport.

After news about the ICE activity was reported, some Virginia elected officials spoke out against it, including U.S. Sens. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner and Rep. Jennifer McClellan.

Also expressing opposition to the operation was Tyrone E. Nelson, a member of the Henrico County Board of Supervisors, whose Varina District includes the airport.

Nelson also is vice chair of the Capital Region Airport Commission, the entity that owns and operates the airport, known by its airport code, RIC.

Nelson says he asked Perry Miller, the airport commission's CEO, to invite someone from the Richmond Air Center to one of the commission's monthly meetings to talk about the ICE connection.

"Their answer was that they wouldn't come and speak in an open session," Nelson told the Defender. "Initially, they said something about speaking in a closed session."

Asked if any of the commission members had personally talked with anyone from the Richmond Jet Center, Nelson said that he has spoken with the company's CEO, Michael Clarke, but didn't learn anything that hadn't already been made public.

"The only thing was, he said this is

something they had to do, that they couldn't tell the federal government "no, and that this is not the first administration they've contracted with to do these flights. He went back to the Obama administration."

"Clearly, we know it's more frequent now, but it's not anything new. He said if we wanted to ask more questions, we should ask the federal government, ask ICE. So I did ask our CEO to look into that, a couple of weeks ago."

And how does Supervisor Nelson feel about ICE using the RIC as a hub for its deportation work?

"If there are people who are here illegally and they are committing murder or some serious crime, I understand that," he said. "And for decades that has not been a problem. But using the federal government to be at war with people of color from other countries for political reasons, I think that's sad."

"So whether it's reducing the local population to influence elections, or just to meet some quota, we make up stories about how horrible immigrants are. I think that is sad, so I have been opposed to those efforts since Trump came into his second term."

Asked if there were any plans to press the issue of the ICE flights at RIC, Nelson said, "At this point, I don't know what we can do, after speaking with our CEO, talking with our counsel. If someone knows something we can do, tell me. I'm all ears."

"We have several members who are opposed to this, but the airport receives a significant amount of funding from the federal government, and I don't know if we're prepared to go to war with them."

**SPREAD INFORMATION,  
NOT PANIC** WHEN REPORTING OR BOOSTING POTENTIAL THREATS, PROVIDE AS MUCH INFORMATION AS POSSIBLE !

REMEMBER! → **S.A.L.U.T.E.**

**S**IZE  
"4-5 law enforcement officers"

**A**CTIVITY/ACTIONS  
"Knocking on someone's door"

**L**OCATION  
"Richmond, at the intersection of W. 27<sup>th</sup> Street and Perry St."

**U**NIFORM/CLOTHES  
"2 plainclothes officers, 3 wearing vests with ERO on the back, all of them masked"

**T**IME  
"Wednesday, February 11<sup>th</sup> at 3:32 PM"

**E**QUIPMENT/WEAPONS  
"Ex: weapons, flexicuffs, dogs, door breakers, unmarked cars with federal license plates, etc"

NOT A USEFUL MESSAGE: "ICE SPOTTED IN SOUTHSIDE, RICHMOND!"

PICTURES AND VIDEOS ARE EXTREMELY HELPFUL. PLEASE ADD THESE TO YOUR REPORTS WHEN POSSIBLE! WE KEEP US SAFE!

## reclaiming our sacred ground

# Shockoe Project Update

By Ana Edwards

The proposed theme for the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground memorial is "Hush Harbor." Announced at the public meeting scheduled to be held at the Black History Museum & Cultural Center of Virginia on Dec. 10, hush harbors (or arbors) were the secret spaces in the woods where enslaved people could gather unobserved to rest, worship or plan.

The memorial will have trees and plants known to have relevance to Black people's lifeways and to the native, waterside environment. The landscape will be lit at night. Pathways and interpretive panels move the visitor through history and time by a reflecting pool and a waterfall to an offering wall and into the Hush Harbor gathering space. The memorial encompasses the area closest to the largest part of the burial ground, on the hillside, surrounded by woods and along where Shockoe once flowed. Baskerville, the firm that is the lead designer and coordinator of the project is in discussion with Afrikan Ancestral Chamber representatives about incorporating the Tekken (obelisk) that the group installed in 2017 on the African Burial Ground site. (See "The Memorial Tekken will remain" on this page.)

The Shockoe Project was launched by the city of Richmond in February 2024 with the goal of completing it in time for Richmond's 300th birthday in 2037. Each aspect of the 10-acre park is being developed in phases. The

Shockoe Institute started construction inside Main Street Station earlier this year and is scheduled to open in the spring. The teams working on the Lumpkin's Jail Pavilion and African Burial Ground memorial are in the midst of finalizing design documents and cost estimates that will be presented to the mayor's office and city council in January.

The overall Shockoe Project is divided into two main project areas named for their geographic locations south and north of East Broad Street. The South Campus includes the Lumpkin's Slave Jail Project (LSJP) archaeology site and the South Memorial to honor all enslaved people traded or sold from Virginia and through Shockoe Bottom. The North Campus includes the African Burial Ground memorial.

Since the public meeting was scheduled to take place after this issue of the newspaper was sent to the printer, a report will be sent out in the next issue of "Updates & Announcements," the e-newsletter of The Virginia Defender.

For City of Richmond information on The Shockoe Project, visit <https://www.rva.gov/capital-improvement-projects/shockoe-project>. For design and program updates, visit Baskerville's Shockoe Project page, <https://www.baskerville.com/projects/the-shockoe-project/> and [shockoe-project.com](http://shockoe-project.com).

## Update:

### Shockoe Institute

By Ana Edwards

Construction continues on the 10,000-square foot Shockoe Institute at Richmond's Main Street Station, but programs have been underway since early this year, either as virtual events or in collaboration with other cultural institutions, including the VCU Institute for Contemporary Art, Virginia Museum of History & Culture and the Library of Virginia. Once its doors open to the public in April 2026, the Institute's core exhibit, "Expanding Freedom," will take visitors through seven themes for telling Richmond's history.

The first, "Clash of Cultures," is the basis for current programming being coordinated by the Institute's founding artistic director, Leyla McCalla. On Nov. 20, "Imagining Solidarity" featured performances by three Afro-Indigenous artists: Martha Redbone, Mali Obomsawin and Charly Lowry, and conversation led by Dr. Tiffany Lethabo King of UVA's Black & Indigenous Feminist Futures Institute (BIFFI). Follow the Shockoe Institute on Instagram, LinkedIn and Vimeo.



Photo by Siddall Communications

Participants in the 23rd Annual Gabriel Gathering pose for a photo in front of the six-banner mural that honors the decades-long struggle to reclaim and properly memorialize Shockoe Bottom, once the epicenter of the domestic slave trade.

## 23rd Annual Gabriel Gathering, 225th Anniversary of the Plan

By Ana Edwards

This year marked 23 years of honoring the memory and legacies of "Gabriel's Rebellion" and the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground.

On Oct. 10, more than 100 people were present for the unveiling of a six-banner "mural" installation, titled "This Is Us." Designed to remind us of our part in the long struggle for historical truths and social justice in Richmond, the mural also informs the public that something is happening down there!

The banners also remind Richmonders of the connections between Gabriel's Rebellion and the city that was the epicenter of the domestic slave trade AND where the U.S. Civil War and slavery would end in Richmond, on the same day, on April 3, 1865.

The original Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality campaign was to help reclaim the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground by popularizing the place and its history. The second phase was to prevent sports stadium-luxury

## 'Test Pits' at Lumpkin's jail site

By Ana Edwards

The next time you visit the Lumpkin's Jail site, there will be archaeology happening.

As part of the Shockoe Project master plan, the work will use what are called "test pits" - basically small excavations - to "re-expose and expand [the discoveries from 2008], preserve them in place beneath a pavilion and create a space that, through intentional public interpretation and multi-level experiences, will finally bring this story into the light."

The goal for this phase of the investigation is not to begin construction, but to "pinpoint the jail's foundations using a combination of Ground-Penetrating Radar and archaeological excavation."

TerraSearch Geophysical is the firm handling the GPR exploration of the site. Tim Roberts, founder of Black Star Cultural Resources, is the archaeological consultant guiding that work.

For updates: [shockoe-project.com](http://shockoe-project.com).

## Good presentations, poor turnout

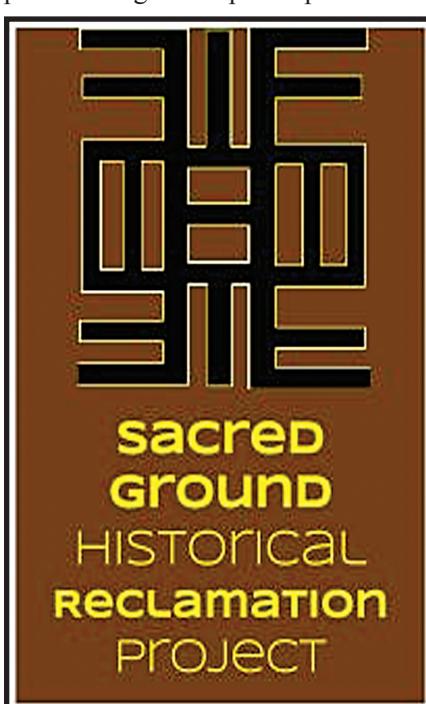
By Ana Edwards

At a public meeting held Dec. 10 at the Black History Museum & Cultural Center of Virginia, the community was offered the first public progress report on the design of the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground memorial.

While the design was enthusiastically received, most of the 45 people attending were familiar faces, involved in some way with the project, directly or indirectly. So, not a bad crowd, just not many of the public that was hoped for.

Speakers included host and lead designer Burt Pinnock (Baskerville), Jill Nolt of Waterstreet (landscape plan) and Taekia Glass, Josh Epperson, and Ana Edwards (interpretive content).

The primary question for the audience was, "Are we on the right track?" As one attendee said, "Beautiful presentation. We've come a long way, I can see the light through the tunnel." Check [sacredgroundproject.net](http://sacredgroundproject.net) for images.



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# Are we really going to war with Venezuela?

By Phil Wilayto

## "And we're gonna hit 'em on land very soon, too."

*- President Donald Trump, speaking with a reporter from Politico Dec. 8 about the U.S. attacks on boats in the Caribbean.*

Since the middle of the summer, the Trump administration has been dramatically escalating its campaign against the South American country of Venezuela and its president, Nicolas Maduro.

On Dec. 10, U.S. forces, including the Coast Guard, F.B.I. and the Department of Homeland Security, seized an oil tanker off Venezuela's coast.

"Speaking at the White House before an event on a new luxury visa program, Mr. Trump announced the operation and said it was 'a large tanker, very large,' adding, without elaboration, that 'other things are happening.'" (The New Times, Dec. 11, 2025)

The tanker is believed to have been carrying Venezuelan oil. The Venezuelan government has called the seizure "blatant theft and international piracy."

Hard to argue with that.

Venezuela has also called this a battle between a David and Goliath. Also hard to argue against: Venezuela currently spends \$5 billion a year on its military. The U.S. Congress just passed a \$900 billion military spending bill.

For months now, the Trump administration has been steadily ramping up military, economic and political pressure on Venezuela, which just happens to be the country with the world's largest known oil reserves.

That pressure includes:

A huge buildup of U.S. forces in the region, with more than 15,000 sailors and marines and a dozen ships in the Caribbean, including the USS Gerald R. Ford, the largest and most advanced aircraft carrier in the world.

Dubbed "Operation Southern Spear," this is the largest buildup of U.S. naval forces in the Caribbean since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

The U.S. military has launched more than 22 known strikes against small boats in the region, killing more than 80 people. Trump claims, without providing evidence, that the boats were smuggling drugs.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth is under intense Congressional pressure to release video of the Sept. 15 missile strike on survivors of a U.S. attack on one of these boats. Killing disabled enemy combatants is a violation of U.S. and international law. Killing helpless civilians is just plain murder.

Trump has warned that the U.S. may "very soon" expand its attacks from boats to targets inside the country.

Trump has signed off on C.I.A. plans for covert actions inside Venezuela, operations that could be meant to prepare a battlefield for further action, or "sabotage or some sort of cyber, psychological or information operations," according to The New York Times.

None of this is happening because Venezuela is presenting any kind of threat to

the United States. Even Trump's claims that President Maduro runs a major drug cartel is contradicted by experts in the field.

And if Trump is so concerned about drugs, why did he just pardon former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, who was convicted last year in a U.S. court of large-scale drug smuggling and sentenced to 45 years in prison for helping to transport tons of cocaine into this country?

No, this isn't about drugs. It's about oil.

Unlike in the United States, most oil-producing countries own and control their own oil. Venezuela's reserves belong to the state-owned Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA), which was established in 1976 when the country nationalized its oil and took full control of the industry from foreign companies like Exxon, Shell and Mobil.

This government-controlled oil is by far the country's main source of foreign revenue. The U.S. used to be its major partner, but U.S. sanctions have ended that relationship.

The U.S. started imposing sanctions on Venezuela in 2015, under President Obama, with sanctions greatly increasing under Trump.

The sanctions involved targeting the oil sector, blocking access to foreign capital and freeing the government's assets.

These sanctions have been devastating to the country's economy, which has shrunk by 80%.

And the sanctions have coincided with a big drop in world oil prices, causing Venezuela to hit with a double whammy.

This is the reason for the hard economic times that have led many Venezuelans to leave and look for a better life elsewhere.

Whatever other problems the country has can best be solved by the people themselves, not by the power that has systematically repressed and exploited Latin America since the first days of the republic.

The question now is, what are we, as the people of the aggressor country, going to do about it?

For our part, the Defenders are initiating a Pledge of Resistance (see page 13), in which organizations and individuals promise to hold a protest the day after any U.S. military attack against Venezuela. A similar Pledge of Resistance in the 1980s was able to build considerable pressure on the Reagan administration not to invade El Salvador or Nicaragua.

We are also making a serious effort to reach out to sailors stationed in Norfolk, to talk with them about the real reasons they are being prepared to possibly go to war against Venezuela and to remind them that, under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, they have the right - and the duty - to refuse illegal orders. (See the "Open Letter to Norfolk sailors to the right.)

We also are upgrading our Defenders Antiwar Committee, and will continue to use the pages of The Virginia Defender to try and educate the public with facts and analysis about international issues, including the escalating threats against Venezuela.

If this is the kind of action you'd like to get involved with, please reach out to us - from any part of Virginia and beyond.

Together, we can make a real difference.

# An Open Letter to Norfolk Sailors

On Sept. 2, a U.S. missile was fired on a small boat in the Caribbean, killing several people and setting the boat on fire. Two crew members survived the attack and were clinging to wreckage, when a second missile was fired, killing both sailors.

President Trump says we are at war against "narco-terrorists." If we really are at war, then killing enemy combatants who are wounded or shipwrecked is a war crime.

And if we're not at war, then U.S. military personnel are being ordered to kill people who are simply accused of running drugs - with absolutely no evidence, and no attempt to collect it.

That's not a war crime, it's just murder.

It's as if some cops decided to shoot some kids because they thought they might be carrying drugs. It would be murder, and everyone would know it.

Recently, six members of Congress, all of them veterans of the military or intelligent services, put out a video reminding active-duty personnel that you have the right - and even the obligation - to refuse unlawful orders.

That's Article 92 of the UCMJ. It says you have the duty to follow lawful orders - not unlawful ones.

We are asking sailors and other military folks based in Virginia, and especially in Norfolk, to think about what you're being asked to do.

Ships out of Norfolk have participated in the bombing of Houthis in Yemen in defense of Israel, at the very time that Israel was carrying out a genocide against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.

Last February, the USS Harry S. Truman carried out a massive bombing of Somalia, an African country being torn apart by a civil war. It was the largest bombing attack by an aircraft carrier in world history.

And ships out of Norfolk are part of the massive flotilla responsible for attacking more than 20 boats in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific, killing more than 80 people - all without any evidence that these boats were presenting any threat to anyone.

Have you asked yourself what you're doing in the Caribbean?

President Trump says the president of Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro, is a major drug lord, responsible for shipping drugs into the U.S.

Again, there is no evidence

of that. What we do know is that Trump just pardoned Juan Orlando Hernandez, the former president of Honduras who was convicted of drug crimes. This guy got 45 years for helping to smuggle tons of cocaine into the U.S. - and Trump pardoned him. That's how much he cares about drugs.

So what's going on? Did you know that Venezuela has the world's largest known oil reserves? More than Saudi Arabia or Iraq or Iran? And because its oil is owned by the Venezuelan government, it's off-limits to U.S. oil companies.

Back when President George W. Bush got us into the war in Iraq, he claimed there were weapons of mass destruction, that Saddam Hussein was tied into 9/11 and was trying to develop nuclear weapons.

It turned out that none of that was true - but Iraq did have a lot of oil. That's when people started up the slogan "No Blood for Oil!"

That war cost the blood of a lot of Iraqis - more than 150,000 dead - and more than 5,000 GIs.

How many people, on both sides, will lose their lives if Trump decides to make war on Venezuela?

Nov. 20 marked 80 years since the start of the Nuremberg Trials, in which high-ranking Nazis were held accountable for their crimes. Those trials established the legal principle that "just following orders" isn't a defense against committing war crimes or crimes against humanity.

Folks, we're not asking you to break the law. We're asking you to obey it.

And most importantly, we're asking you to think about what you're being told to do.

The men and women of the **Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality** An all-volunteer organization working for the survival of our communities through education and social justice action.

## Some resources:

**Veterans for Peace 757 (on Facebook)**

**Veterans for Peace (national) veteransforpeace.org**

**About Face: Veterans Against the War - aboutfaceveterans.org**

**GI Rights Hotline - girightshotline.org - 877-447-4487**



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Four Puerto Rican activist organizations and the Norfolk chapter of Veterans for Peace protest in front of the main gate of the Norfolk Naval Station, where many of the U.S. ships now threatening Venezuela are homeported.

## Antiwar message raised at homeport of U.S. ships threatening Venezuela

By Phil Wilayto

NORFOLK, VA, Nov. 22 -- Of all the protests taking place around the world against escalating U.S. aggression against Venezuela, probably none are more significant than the one held today outside the Norfolk Naval Station in Norfolk, Va., homeport for many of the Navy ships now stationed in the Caribbean.

Despite intermittent rain showers, about two dozen activists held signs and chanted slogans for nearly two hours outside the station's main gate as active-duty members and civilian workers drove in and out of the base.

Significantly, supportive honks and thumbs-up outnumbered the few hostile responses.

"It was important to hold the protest because our government is killing people extrajudicially in the Caribbean, and it is also using its continued illegal occupation of Puerto Rico to do so," said Ezra, an organizer with the Puerto Rican Historical Collective, a sponsor of today's protest.

"Norfolk, as the largest naval base and the one sending the most ships to the region, has a direct responsibility for those deaths," Ezra said. "And as people in the belly of the beast, and as Puerto Ricans in particular, it is important to amplify the calls of those being directly impacted by warships sent straight from here. Norfolk is an extremely important place to build and strengthen the antiwar movement, and specifically the anti-NATO movement."

Other organizations sponsoring the protest were Juventud Unida por la Independencia, Adolfina, Diaspora Pa'lante Collective and Veterans for Peace 757. Members of several other organizations attended, including the Norfolk Catholic Worker and the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality.

It's not surprising that four out of the five organizations co-sponsoring today's protest are Puerto Rican. In September,

the Navy reactivated the Roosevelt Roads base in Ceiba, Puerto Rico, part of the recent military build-up in the area.

The base had been closed since 2004. As stated in a press release announcing today's protest, "This move highlights the continued colonial dominance of Puerto Rico as the U.S. ignores decades of struggle waged to close the bases in the archipelago."

When it comes to the U.S. military, few states are more important than Virginia. The "Old Dominion" is home to the Pentagon, which has given President Trump options for aggression against Venezuela. It also hosts the headwaters of the Central Intelligence Agency, which Trump has authorized to carry out covert operations on Venezuelan soil; as well as the Norfolk Naval Station, the world's largest, and headquarters for the Navy's Atlantic Fleet.

Many of the dozen or so ships now deployed to the Caribbean are homeported in Norfolk, including the USS Gerald R. Ford, the world's largest and most advanced aircraft carrier. U.S. drones and missiles have attacked and sunk more than 20 small boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific, killing more than 80 people, with the Trump administration claiming - without a shred of proof - that the boats were carrying drugs to the U.S.

The U.S. Navy has reopened the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Puerto Rico, giving it greater capacity to carry out attacks in the region. Trump has authorized the CIA to carry out covert operations on Venezuelan soil. He has offered a \$50 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, whom he accuses of being a world-class drug cartel leader. Meanwhile, Trump has pardoned former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, an actual convicted major drug trafficker.

The reasons Trump is giving for the military buildup and attacks are blatant lies. What explains U.S. hostility is the fact that Venezuela has the world's largest known oil reserves. And the oil is owned by the Venezuelan government, so it's out of the reach of the profit-mad U.S. oil companies.

Significantly, on Nov. 18, six members of Congress, all veterans or former intelligence officers, released a video reminding members of the military and intelligence officers that they have the right - and the duty - to refuse illegal orders.

Coincidentally, Nov. 20 marked the 80th anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials, which established the legal precedent that acting under orders is not a defense against charges of committing war crimes or crimes against humanity.

## Join us in a PLEDGE OF RESISTANCE to Oppose a U.S. War Against Venezuela!

I/my organization pledges to gather at our local city hall, county seat or federal building on the day after any U.S. attack on Venezuela to demand:

**U.S. Hands Off Venezuela!  
No Blood for Oil!**

**Money for Jobs & Education,  
not for War & Occupation!  
Bring Our Sailors Home Now!**

### TO ENDORSE:

Send your name and/or the name of your organization to: [DefendersFJE@hotmail.com](mailto:DefendersFJE@hotmail.com). If this is an organizational endorsement, please give your position in the group.

You can also text the information to the Defenders at: 804.644.5834.

### THE BACKGROUND

As of the end of 2025, the U.S. has some 15 Navy ships stationed in the Caribbean, including the USS Gerald R. Ford, the world's largest and most advanced aircraft carrier. U.S. drones and missiles have attacked and sunk more than 20 small boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific, killing more than 80 people, with the Trump administration claiming - without a shred of proof - that the boats were carrying drugs to the U.S.

The U.S. Navy has reopened the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Puerto Rico, giving it greater capacity to carry out attacks in the region. Trump has authorized the CIA to carry out covert operations on Venezuelan soil. He has offered a \$50 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, whom he accuses of being a world-class drug cartel leader. Meanwhile, Trump has pardoned former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, an actual convicted major drug trafficker.

The reasons Trump is giving for the military buildup and attacks are blatant lies. What explains U.S. hostility is the fact that Venezuela has the world's largest known oil reserves. And the oil is owned by the Venezuelan government, so it's out of the reach of the profit-mad U.S. oil companies.

We have been down this sorry road before: Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction - but it did have oil. And because of that lie, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of U.S. soldiers lost their lives.

### WHAT WE CAN DO

Back in the 1980s, antiwar activists started a Pledge of Resistance, in which individuals and organizations pledged to come out and protest the day after any U.S. attack on Nicaragua or El Salvador. The movement grew and became a real factor in preventing the U.S. from invading those countries.

Today, with the very real threat of a U.S. war against Venezuela, we need a similar way to increase pressure on Washington to back off from its war posture and learn to live in peace with other countries.

Those of us who live in Virginia have a special responsibility to oppose this threat of war. Virginia is home to the Pentagon, which has already supplied Trump with concrete options for attacking Venezuela. It has the headquarters of the CIA, which Trump has authorized to carry out covert actions inside Venezuela. We're home to major military contractors like General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman, BAE Systems, CACI International and Leidos Leonardo DRS, all headquartered in Northern Virginia. Lockheed Martin and Raytheon both have major footprints in Virginia. And most of the Navy ships now in the Caribbean are homeported in Norfolk, home to the world's largest naval base.

We are calling on all justice-loving people in Virginia and beyond to sign onto this simple pledge and encourage all your friends, neighbors, co-workers and organizations to do the same. (Specific details of time and place can be worked out locally.)



**Plowshare Peace Center**  
The oldest peace group in Virginia  
Silent peace vigils. Workshops & speakers.  
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(540) 492-3582 [plowshare@plowshareva.org](mailto:plowshare@plowshareva.org)  
[www.plowshareva.org](http://www.plowshareva.org)

## Sudan, the Silent Victim: A brief overview

By Shumce-Sabah Jayeh

While many people may not know much about Sudan, it is currently facing one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world.

For reference, Sudan is the country located directly south of Egypt and next to the Red Sea. It was the largest nation in both Africa and the Arab League until South Sudan seceded in 2011, which made Sudan the third largest. Today the population is around 50 million people.

Sudan entered its current war in 2023. The conflict is between the Sudanese Armed Forces, which are composed of Sudanese nationals, and the Rapid Support Forces, which are heavily funded militias seeking control of the country.

Many reports point to the United Arab Emirates as a major financial supporter of these militias. The fact that the UAE is a major U.S. ally in the critical Middle East region might explain why the U.S. has generally been silent about what is happening in Sudan. The UAE hosts the Al Dhafra Air Base, a critical hub for the U.S. Air Force. El Ali Port is the U.S. Navy's largest port of call in the Middle East, regularly hosting U.S. aircraft carriers and other vessels.

The UAE is not the only country supporting one or the other side in the Sudanese conflict, and the reason is connected to Sudan's resources, which are extremely valuable.

Sudan and South Sudan together are among the world's top gold producers and hold significant oil reserves. These resources attract foreign powers that want influence over Sudan's land and wealth. Their interference has caused deep suffering for the Sudanese people.

War and the foreign involvement that is funding it have caused Sudan economic collapse, widespread fear and mass starvation throughout this beautiful Saharan land.

Nearly 12 million people have been displaced due to the most recent war, with the number of people in need of humanitarian aid reaching nearly 30 million. Around half the population faces extreme food insecurity, meaning nearly 25 million do not know when they will have their next meal.

Further, women are facing horrific violence in areas controlled by militias, to the point where many choose death over the alternative. Nearly 12.1 million, about 25% of the population, are at risk of gender-based crimes.

Entire communities have been destroyed. Millions have been displaced inside and outside the country, not to mention landmarks destroyed, homes invaded and families split apart.

This crisis is one of the worst in

Sudan's modern history. Many people want to escape but cannot afford to. Some are turned away at the border for not having necessary documents. This causes others to flee by dangerous desert routes, risking their lives as refugees. Sudan's natural wealth is being exploited by those whose greed overshadows any sense of humanity, while the people continue to suffer.

Hard times are nothing new in Sudan. Throughout its past, Sudan has experienced periods of occupation, being captured and freed since ancient times. It was occupied by Britain from 1899 until Sudan finally gained its independence, on Jan. 1, 1956.

The issues did not end there. Since independence, the country has gone through several military takeovers.

In 1989, Omar Al-Bashir used the military to take control of the government. His rule lasted nearly 30 years. During his time in power, the Darfur Genocide took place. Rebel groups in Darfur, mainly the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army and the Justice and Equality Movement, fought against the government. The first genocide in Darfur resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and displaced millions of Sudanese citizens.

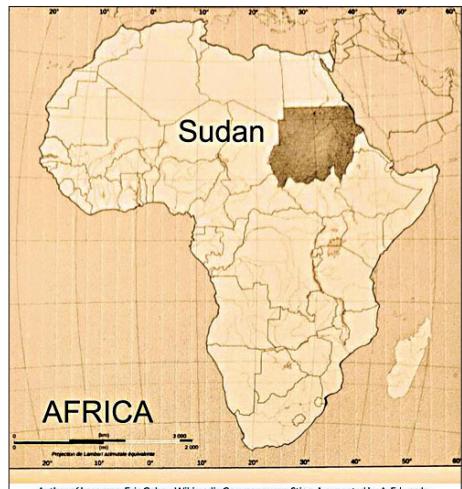
The issues have risen once again with the chaos now ravaging the country. The current iteration has seen the RSF militias killing non-Arabs in Darfur. Millions again are displaced. This is destroying native allies of Sudan residents, who may have had ties going back generations, wiped out in the violence fueled by the greed of those with the glimmer of the riches of others in their eyes. Extreme violence against women has become widespread in what has become a lawless land.

Al-Bashir was eventually removed from power after decades of violence and corruption, which even led to Sudan being suspended from the African Union. After his removal, other countries, including the United Arab Emirates, began investing heavily in Sudan's military and political landscape.

Sudan's story today is one of pain, but also resilience. The soul of the country is being suffocated by conflict and outside forces, yet the Sudanese people remain strong, hopeful and determined to survive. They deserve global attention and support in this difficult time.

Recently, all over Africa, nations have begun reclaiming their resources and using them to boost their own infrastructures, with countries such as Nigeria leading the economic charge.

This can also be considered another reason for the terror currently happening in Sudan. It's too valuable for outside forces to lose, so for now it's a land of hunger and chaos.



## Support for Palestine strong across Virginia

By Danielle DiBlasio

Pro-Palestine activists across Virginia are leaning hard into boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns as Israel continues its assault on the Gaza Strip despite the announcement of a ceasefire on Oct. 10.

As of Dec. 3, the Gaza Health Ministry reports that at least 357 Palestinians have been killed by Israel since the start of the ceasefire. In addition, Israel has repeatedly and flagrantly violated the terms of the agreement by continuing to restrict the entry of aid, food and tents.

The DMV (D.C./Maryland/Virginia) chapter of the Palestinian Youth Movement, in collaboration with organizations from across Virginia such as Virginia for Palestine, Virginia Defenders, NOVA Branch DSA and PSL of Virginia soft-launched a campaign over the summer to pressure the Virginia Retirement System to divest from weapons manufacturers and logistics companies that have profited from Israel's genocide in Gaza.

On Sept. 25, before the start of a VRS Board of Trustees meeting (which are open to the public), Richmond police officers tackled and then issued a citation to a Virginia firefighter as he attempted to present a copy of the VRS No Pensions for Genocide petition to

board members. All charges against the firefighter have since been dropped.

On Nov. 13, PYM, PSL and Richmond for Palestine, a coalition that includes the Defenders, held a press conference and rally outside the VRS office in downtown Richmond to officially launch the VRS No Pensions for Genocide campaign to the greater public.

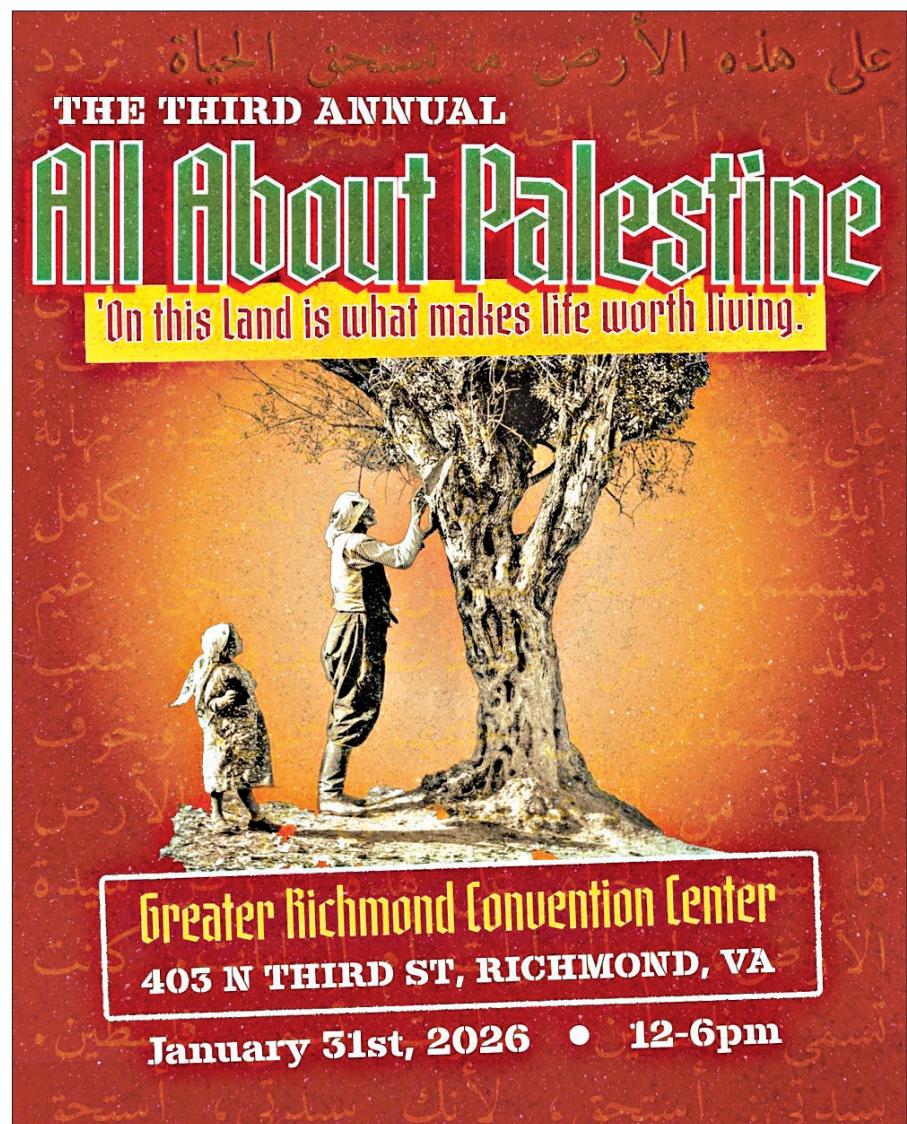
The event was attended by around 40 people and featured speeches from workers who pay into the VRS and spoke about their support for the divestment campaign.

On this past "Black Friday," Richmond activists set up a roadside protest near the Short Pump Mall, urging shoppers to withhold their holiday purchasing from brands and corporations that profit from Israel's genocide.

In Northern Virginia, Alexandria for Palestinian Human Rights has been campaigning to have the Alexandria City Council pass an ethical investment resolution. This would establish that no future investments are made in companies flagged for committing human rights violations, as well as divestment from current holdings.

While there is reportedly support from some members of the city council, the Jewish Community Relations

See PALESTINE on page 15



## international &amp; antiwar news

**PALESTINE** cont. from page 14

Council of Northern Virginia has engaged in an opposition email campaign. Members of Alexandria for Palestine noted that their grassroots efforts show the widespread community support for city divestment, versus a small if influential opposition.

Meanwhile, activists from a range of organizations hold a weekly protest every Friday in Richmond, while Hampton Roads for Palestine does the same every Saturday in Norfolk. In Roanoke, the Plowshare Peace &

Justice Center holds a monthly silent vigil for peace, the longest continuing peace protest in the state.

Commitment to boycotts and divestment campaigns and urging sanctions is more important now than ever for the people of the United States, Israel's top financial and military supplier.

To truly stand with Palestinians is to fight to ensure that Israel no longer has the weapons, money and diplomatic support needed to continue its oppression of the Palestinian people.

**Free Palestine!**

**NO  
MONEY  
FOR  
ISRAEL!**

**Virginia Defenders  
for Freedom, Justice & Equality**

**ICE  
fuera de  
RICHMOND!**

Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality



Photo by Phil Wilayto

**"Odessa will not forget May 2!!!"** Two years after the fascist-led attack on Odessa's House of Trade Unions on May 2, 2014, an atrocity that resulted in the deaths of more than 40 people, this graffiti defiantly expresses the spirit of resistance still strong in this Hero City.

## Comments on the Russia/Ukraine Peace Plan

*Phil Wilayto, editor of The Virginia Defender and Coordinator of the anti-fascist Odessa Solidarity Campaign, was asked by a reporter for the Russian news agencies Sputnik and RIA Novosti to comment on the peace plan being proposed by the Trump administration to end the a between Russia and Ukraine. These are the comments that were submitted.*

As of the beginning of December, the Trump administration says it is "fine tuning" a peace plan to end the fighting in Ukraine. Ukraine and its European allies oppose the plan, saying it favors Russia.

It is important to understand that the current war didn't start in 2022 with Russia's intervention in Ukraine. Instead, it began in 2014, after the February coup that overthrew an elected president and replaced him with an unelected right-winger who relied on paramilitary fascist organizations to stay in power.

That spring, the people of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbass region of Ukraine, many of whom remembered the fascist occupation of their country in World War II, declared their independence and formed "people's republics."

The new Ukrainian government responded by opening a military offensive to retake the Donbass, using the paramilitary organizations as its shock troops. This was the beginning of the war.

It wasn't until 2022 - eight years later - that the Russian Federation incorporated the breakaway republics.

In the meantime, it had become clear that the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Or-

ganization, or NATO, was using the war to try and weaken and destabilize Russia. These powers wanted to pull Ukraine into the European orbit, bring it into NATO and so complete the Western encirclement of Russia, whose massive natural resources are coveted by the U.S. and the other NATO countries.

In our view, a real peace plan would include the following points:

A recognition that the war in Ukraine was the result of the mounting U.S./NATO pressure on Russia, plus the 2014 right-wing coup, plus Kiev's attacks on the independent, anti-fascist Donbass republics.

A pledge by Ukraine that it will not seek to join NATO.

A recognition that Crimea, which until 1954 had long been part of Russia, has legitimately returned to Russia as a result of a referendum held right after the 2014 coup; and that the Donbass region, whose people have courageously fought back against the Ukraine offensive, is now legitimately part of the Russian Federation.

A pledge by Russia that it will seek no more Ukrainian land, a pledge that would be backed up by a regional security pact to ensure peace between Ukraine and Russia.

An international agreement that the Ukrainian government must be held accountable for the political repression that it and its paramilitary supporters have carried out against those in Ukraine who objected to the 2014 coup.

And this accountability must include the massacre of more than 40 people who were murdered on May 2, 2014, when a fascist-led mob set fire to the House of Trade Unions in Odessa.

**ICE  
out of  
VIRGINIA!**

Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

# In our opinion

## Worth remembering

This Nov. 20th will mark the 80th anniversary of the start of the Nuremberg Trials, in which leading members of the Nazi Party were held accountable for their war crimes, crimes against peace and crimes against humanity. The trials lasted nearly a year and established the principle that individuals could be prosecuted for such crimes.

Now, eight decades after the defeat of fascism, that horrific political phenomenon, along with other forms of right-wing authoritarianism, is again emerging in countries around the globe.

While many governments are guilty of moving their countries in this direction, those with the most power to inflict pain and suffering must bear the greatest responsibility - starting with the most powerful country, the United States.

While we don't have a true fascist movement in the U.S. - the massive marches and rallies that have taken place throughout this year have been in opposition to the Trump administration, not in support of it - the present administration is systematically dismantling what has passed as democracy here.

In pursuit of his anti-worker, pro-billionaire agenda, Trump has ignored the law, even the foundational Constitution. He has pardoned the people who on Jan. 6, 2021, carried out a violent attack on the U.S. Capitol. He has deployed National Guard members and Border Patrol agents to major cities under the pretext of fighting crime.

And, like all fascist regimes, he has sought to whip up hatred against people of color, particularly those who have come to the U.S. to seek a better life after their own countries have been devastated by U.S. foreign policy.

Very few people who lived through the fascist period of the 1930s and '40s are still alive today. The collective memory has faded, and the rightwing has attempted to present fascist ideas as a legitimate political view like any other.

The 80th anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials can be one way to remind people of the horrors of fascism, as well as the fact that those who commit war crimes, crimes against peace and crimes against humanity, can one day find themselves the object of universal justice, with the resulting consequences.

Hopefully, people of good faith will use this opportunity to rekindle an understanding of the severe dangers of fascism and authoritarianism and organize against it. Good will is important, but effective actions must follow.

# Letters to the Editor

## Det. Ford - again

I, Mr. Shawn 'Sha' Johnson, am an inmate who has been incarcerated for the past 32 years fighting a case of murder/robbery which I did not do and which was the result of the corrupt ex-detective Robert Glenn Ford's widespread and persistent fraud.

It is my sincere belief that if my case got the attention it deserves, I will be freed after serving more than three decades of false imprisonment.

The lead detective in my case has since been discredited and charged with felonies, as well as incarcerated for fraudulent actions. Every time I turn around, another innocent person is being released because of the fraudulent activities of this ex-detective. Robert Glenn Ford has served or was sentenced to 12-and-a-half years in a Federal/State Prison.

I need your help in getting my case the publicity and attention it deserves. Thank you for your time and attention in this matter.

Sincerely,

Shawn Sha Johnson  
Nottaway Correctional Center  
BURKEVILLE

**Editor's note:** The Project for Informed Reform at the University of Virginia is looking into cases handled by disgraced former Norfolk Detective Robert Glenn Ford. This is from the project's website:

"At the request of the elected Norfolk Commonwealth's Attorney, we will continue reviewing and analyzing all the serious felony cases that had been assigned to a corrupt homicide detective who was later convicted and served time for crimes he committed while employed by the Norfolk Police Department."

People who believe their cases were unfairly influenced by Ford can contact the project at:

Project for Informed Reform  
University of Virginia  
1001 Emmet St. N.  
Charlottesville, VA 22903

## Conflict of interest?

Pocahontas State Correctional Center is one of the largest employers in this area, not including colleges and hospitals. The same is true for lots of small towns across Virginia, which brings me to the ultimate question:

IS IT IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF VADOC TO REHABILITATE CRIMINAL MINDS AND SUBSEQUENTLY REDUCE RECIDIVISM?

I witness firsthand the lack of effort to (1) create and implement new and effective programming; (2) cut down on inmate substance abuse and (3) the utter lack of serious mental health therapy.

I have come to the conclusion that VADOC has placed the continued financial wellbeing of staff over true rehabilitation efforts. In other words, people remain gainfully employed while doing a substandard job.

VADOC will point to programs like T4C, Victim Impact and Anger Manage-



ment as "effective" staples of departmental rehabilitation. But those programs have a yearlong waiting list, limited class size and a "rubber stamp" completion that requires only minimal effort/engagement on our part.

VADOC has a generation of staff who have been told, "Don't put much effort into rehabilitating them." VADOC has created more career criminals than it has rehabbed. If VADOC really put sincere efforts into rehabilitation over the last 20 years, the prison population would have dramatically decreased, subsequently causing more prisons to close.

because most of Virginia's prisoners, regardless of security level, have a release date. The murders of innocent citizens, fentanyl overdoses of children, rapes, robberies, [and] shootings can be prevented.

If VADOC allows its treatment services and staff to remain lackadaisical, stagnant and ineffective, the blood of future victims will be on its hands.

The problem is that thousands of folks from rural towns would be unemployed.

Based on these facts, I do not believe VADOC will ever require any prison to truly attempt to rehabilitate its prisoners. It's a conflict of interest.

Philip Daniel  
Pocahontas State Correctional Center  
POCAHONTAS

The issue is of great consequence,

**The Virginia Defender**  
A statewide quarterly newspaper published by the  
**VIRGINIA DEFENDERS FOR FREEDOM, JUSTICE & EQUALITY**

**Editorial Board:** Ana Edwards, Phil Wilayto **Editor:** Phil Wilayto

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# The people united will never be defeated

By Joharah Baker

I was born in the United States and lived there through early childhood, but since returning with my family to Palestine, I have never wanted to go back. The United States has always evoked mixed feelings in me. I have a certain nostalgia for the place of my birth, but my overall sentiments always culminated in a sense of resentment for this so-called superpower that has systematically aided in my people's oppression, occupation and dehumanization.

That is, until present day. The scenes of American university campuses brimming with students in keffiyehs, waving Palestinian flags and resisting the brutality of the police and their own university administrations, has uplifted my spirit in ways I cannot fully articulate.

In a word, what is happening on U.S. campuses today is validation of our people, of Palestine and of our struggle. To those who live comfortable lives in free countries, this may sound like an exaggeration, but for my people, who have been denied their very right to exist, who have been demoralized, demonized and dehumanized, this is huge.

We are seeing students of all races, creeds, backgrounds and religions calling for an end to the genocide in the Gaza Strip and marching for a free Palestine and divestment from the Israeli occupation. We are hearing Jewish voices, debunking Zionist propaganda and its below-the-belt attempts to conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. We are being validated for our struggle, for our resistance against oppression, occupation and settler-colonialism and we are finally being heard and seen.

Students have always been the litmus test for social and political justice. Rallies and demonstrations on university campuses have been the driving force against imperialist wars throughout the ages, the Vietnam War being the best example. However, what is so incredible about this movement is that American students are not directly involved in Palestine. Students are

not being drafted into an army to fight on foreign soil, so the stakes are not as high for them at the personal level. What is happening today is the direct result of the intersectionality of struggles and the belief that no one is free until all of us are free. This is a force far more powerful than a genocidal regime will ever be.

The scenes from university campuses in the United States and now in Europe, juxtaposed against the crushing images from the Gaza Strip, are a balm for our wounded hearts. We feel a kinship with these incredible Gen Zs who have put their very lives on the line for Palestine. We send them love, energy and solidarity as we watch them being thrown to the ground, handcuffed and arrested and we burst with pride as we hear them chant "Free Palestine."

This is a moment in time that must not be squandered. May these American university protests spread like wildfire throughout campuses across the world, putting to shame both Zionism and American imperialism, which has allowed this racist ideology to survive.

The Palestinians have never wavered in their determination to liberate their land from Israeli occupation and oppression, whether they do it alone or with the help of friends. Today, thanks to the beautiful people all over the world who have championed our cause alongside of us, a free Palestine is not only an inevitability, it is just around the corner.

*Joharah Baker is a Palestinian-American writer and translator. She was born in Portsmouth, Va., but has lived most of her life in Jerusalem and Ramallah, Palestine, where she has worked in media and translation for more than 25 years. Baker has been published in Palestinian, Arab and international news outlets and also works in international advocacy on Palestine, with a focus on Israeli violations against Palestinian women and girls under occupation. This piece was originally published by MIFTAH.*

## INFORMATION IS POWER!

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# Living trans in Virginia

By Aurora Higgs

Imagine that you've waited the majority of your life to receive the most precious gift you've ever been given. Then you get that gift, and it's more beautiful and precious than you could've possibly imagined. Now imagine that instead of spending the rest of your days enjoying your gift, you are forced to spend that time protecting it from a world of people who want to take it from you. But it doesn't stop there. In some cases, they also want to vilify you and remove that precious gift from existence.

That's what it's like being transgender in the United States in 2025.

The analogy above is, admittedly, a bit reductive. The truth of the matter is that being transgender is so much more wonderful and scary than I could possibly put into words. And let me be clear: being transgender can certainly be difficult, but for the sole reason that my identity has been politicized in a way that we're being used as scapegoats for those who want to advance their political agendas and careers. It's a tactic as old as time: convince your community that a fake problem exists, work them up with false stories of a "boogeyman", then pretend that you have the solution to exterminate the problem. This is classic fearmongering, and it has proven effective many times in history.

It also bears mentioning that in 2025, trans individuals are not the only scapegoats being targeted in contemporary propaganda. Migrant peoples, anti-Zionists, leftists, and even Gen Z have been the target of such toxic rhetoric.

I won't mince words: 2025 has already been exhausting and emotionally draining. I have shed an unquantifiable amount of tears because I was terrified about what the future would hold for me and those being targeted. Conservatives have been positioning their campaigns on single-issue threats of eliminating DEI and rolling back the rights of trans people. I could barely leave the house and was constantly experiencing dizzy spells because my blood pressure was through the roof from the stress. I was worried that my existence was going to be outlawed and I'd be forced to leave the country I've called home. Eventually, I had to come to terms with the fact that the looming threat and fear were not going to magically disappear. Being a Vir-

ginia native, I also had to acknowledge that I am relatively lucky that I live in a state with moderate protections for trans adults. So, I can choose to hide in fear (which is what those who target us want) or I can be a voice for my community and amplify the needs and challenges of other communities being targeted similarly to mine.

Being in Virginia has been a godsend, which may surprise many who grew up in historically progressive states. I grew up being a visibly queer child who had the courage and audacity to come out as such to my parents at the wise old age of 7. As much as I'd love to take credit for such courage and audacity, it mostly stemmed from growing up around people who loved me unconditionally and were far more interested in fostering my precociousness rather than grooming me into fitting into some heteronormative mold that was much too confined for someone like me. So I owe a lot to Virginia, specifically to my community in Richmond, where there stands a mural in my honor on MacArthur Avenue. I hope more than anything that Virginia will continue to uphold the values of its diverse peoples, many of whom do not want to see democracy being undermined by those who are willing to sell out in order to cater to billionaires.

Unfortunately, Virginia is not out of the woods yet. I write this piece a month before the Virginia governor's race, and there is so much riding on this election because of our country's slide toward fascism. I want to continue to call Virginia my home, but if the results of the election are not favorable, then I will be forced to relocate. At the beginning of this year, I put out a crowdfunding campaign to raise money to leave the United States if necessary. I just want the freedom to live my life in peace and achieve all of my most grandiose goals for this lifetime. Transgender people are not a threat to anyone's livelihoods, and we simply want the same in return. Believe it or not, we have so much to offer this world. The world simply needs to allow us to thrive to do so.

*Aurora Higgs (she/they) is a Richmond-based producer, actor, consultant and professional speaker who specializes in the intersections of Black, queer and performance-based media.*

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## Model prisons, mental health, staff shortages: An interview with Margaret Breslau

**Editor's note:** After at least six men severely burned themselves at Red Onion State Prison in a desperate attempt to get transferred out of that notorious hellhole, the Virginia Department of Corrections did two things: They punished the men who self-immolated, and they instituted some major changes in the prison system.

To try and better understand these changes, the Defender spoke with Margaret Breslau, a co-founder of the Virginia Prison Justice Network and chair of the Coalition for Justice, which produces a monthly newsletter for the VAPJN that is sent to thousands of prisoners, reaching virtually every Virginia facility. Margaret is probably in touch with more prisoners than any other single person in Virginia. Like the Defenders, all her work in support of prisoners is voluntary..

This is our interview with Margaret Breslau.

D: What's happening with these "model prisons" we're hearing so much about? And the changes in the security level designations for many prisons?

MB: They're expanding the network of model prisons, or units, and I've been told they are expanding the model to include a women's prison.

And they had to move a lot of people around because to be assigned to a model prison they had to have four years infraction-free, so the decision was made about changing the security level designations.

There's a model unit in Greensville. I write to people there and they say positive things about it. I recently visited a model prison in Dillwyn, to go to a talent show. That's not a good time to have a big discussion, but people said they are served actual meat. They have chicken. They have real mattresses. There's more freedom to move around. They can self-organize events. It's working with staff, but they have some control over the kinds of things they want to see happen there.

I took a peek in the library. They actually have a pretty good library there.

Things aren't perfect, but people I talk with say they feel safe there, and that's a big thing.

Meanwhile, other prisoners feel like their prisons are seen as dumping grounds.

With the recent tragic murder of a staff member at River North, the response from the DOC is to punish. Tear gas. Lockdown. There's no effort to de-escalate violence. These are situations where residents feel unsafe, they feel unheard, can't get validation for their is-

sues.

They talk about mental health. [VA-DOC Director Chadwick] Dotson recently talked about the mental health of staff members, but not about residents. I don't hear anyone talking about that.

Both staff and residents are overstressed. They both have a lot of anxiety and fear, but there's not a way to move forward to make sure everyone is safe.

I really haven't heard about anyone saying anything about the mental health of people at River North. And the lockdowns are just a form of solitary confinement.

The legislature has a lot on their plates, along with a lack of resources, but it will take policy changes, legislative changes. Someone has to ask how often you can put people on lockdown, when you can use rubber bullets. The officials just say these are temporary measures. We need legislative changes, and people deserve to know what is going on here.

D: What about parole? Very few people are getting it. Do you think there will be changes with the new governor?

MB: On parole, Morrison, a Democrat, and Doggs, a Republican, they talked about parole and expanding eligibility and said it would take some time. This was reported in June. And they say they need a study bill, because it's a huge thing to change parole eligibility.

Changing the board usually happens with new governors, but that's not enough. We need legislative change as well.

D: There have been a lot of deaths in the prisons, a lot of suicides.

The DOC only reports what they are required to report.

There are "cooldown rooms" - everyone hates it because it's just another form of punishment. It isolates you.

The CWA [Communications Workers of America] represents 1,000 corrections officers in Virginia. They talk about the need for more staffing and mental health care, with non-COs taking on CO roles, like a counselor filling in for someone.

And there's the problem of pushing for people to be snitches. Of course, that's very dangerous.

People are afraid of being hurt by pepper spray, dogs, rubber bullets. The DOC said rubber bullets are prohibited at juvenile facilities, but not the adult ones.

When there was the incident at Wallens Ridge [guards were allegedly attacked by gang members], they moved all the Hispanics to Red Onion, even some who were not at Wallens Riege.

## River North guard death raises many questions

By Phil Wilayto

Until Nov. 17, it had been 50 years since a Virginia prison guard had been killed by an inmate. According to the Virginia Department of Corrections, that changed when a corrections officer was severely injured by an inmate at the River North Correctional Center in Grayson County in Southwest Virginia. The guard later died of his injuries.

On Dec. 5, after hearing concerns from prisoners and their family members about what happened at River North, the Defender sent the following email to Kyle Gibson, VADOC's chief communications officer:

Mr. Gibson,

I am writing to ask VADOC to comment on the following:

According to VADOC, on Nov. 17, Corrections Officer Jeremy Lewis Hall was severely injured at the River North Correctional Center and later pronounced dead at a local hospital. Inmate John Holomon Russell, ID #1464965, is said to have attacked CO Hall, causing his injuries.

It is alleged that inmate Russell was beaten by other COs after the alleged attack.

Another River North inmate, Kenneth Drexel Evans III, ID #1446064, is said to have witnessed the alleged attack while locked in a nearby cellblock. It is alleged that Inmate Evans was later taken out of his cell, beaten by COs, strapped into a chair equipped with a shock belt and shocked twice, causing him to pass out. He also is said to have been tased mul-

The ACLU asked about it and the DOC said they were all gang members. Some people told me they had been in a gang when they were younger and on the street, but hadn't been in a gang for a long time.

D: How much do you think the staff shortages play into all of this?

MB: There clearly are staff shortages. Not just in Virginia, but every in prison system and in the federal prisons

The best way to address the staff shortage is to reduce the number of prisoners. After something like what happened at River North, you're not going to get people to sign up.

You have to start looking at expanding geriatric parole. Geriatric prisoners are the least likely to recidivate, and they're the most costly to keep in prison.

And enhancing Earned Sentence Credit [credit for good behavior that reduces a sentence length] to include the time someone spent in a local jail. HB-45 passed in 20A24, but then Youngkin vetoed it.

If you can depopulate prisons, the staff won't be stretched so thin, and we should be seriously looking at decarceration and depopulation efforts.

iple times.

Both Russell and Evans have since been transferred to Red Onion State Prison.

These are my questions:

Has VADOC charged Inmate Russell with any infraction related to the death of CO Hall?

Was Inmate Russell beaten by COs after the alleged altercation with CO Hall?

Is it correct that, after the alleged altercation between Inmate Russell and CO Hall, that Inmate Evans was taken out of his cell, beaten by COs, strapped into a chair equipped with a shock belt and shocked, causing him to pass out, and also tased?

Has VADOC charged Inmate Evans with any infraction following the death of CO Hall?

Why was Inmate Evans transferred to Red Onion?

I would appreciate receiving your answers no later than 5 p.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 9.

Thank you.

Phil Wilayto

Editor

The Virginia Defender

As of noon on Wednesday, Dec. 10, there has been no response from VADOC.

If any of our readers has any information about this matter, they are asked to contact us at: Defenders, PO Box 23202, Richmond, VA 23223; email: DefendersFJE@hotmail.com; phone or text: 804.644.5834.

Are you upset about what's happening inside Virginia's prisons and jails?

Do you want to do something about it?

Then join the Defenders **Prisoner Solidarity Committee!**

The PSC meets every Wednesday evening to answer letters and emails from the women and men behind the walls.

We investigate grievances and expose unjust conditions. We hold public meetings and protests. And we link the struggle for Prison Justice to all the other struggles: immigrant rights, labor organizing, Sacred Ground Reclamation, the anti-war movement and more.

The Defenders and all our committees are made up of volunteers who dedicate their time and energy to fighting for social justice.

If this appeals to you, get in touch with us today!

**Prisoner Solidarity Committee**

PO Box 23202  
Richmond, VA 23223  
Phone/Text: 804.644.5834  
Email: DefendersFJE@hotmail.com

## cops, courts &amp; prisons

## Fishback? A message from RIHD

Did you receive parole in Virginia through the Fishback provision of SB-793? RIHD, INC. is seeking individuals who were granted parole under this eligibility criteria. We welcome you home. As the founder of the position paper and leader of the advocacy effort that led to the law enabling your freedom, we would appreciate it if you could identify yourself or know of someone who was granted parole under this provision. We need to speak with you to continue our efforts in supporting those who remain incarcerated. Please contact Lillie (Ms K) Branch-Kennedy, Founder, at <https://rihd.org/contact-us> or (804) 426-4426.

In solidarity,

Lillie Branch-Kennedy (Ms K)  
Founder  
Resource Information Help for the  
Disadvantaged and Disenfranchised  
RIHD, INC.  
PO Box 55  
Highland Springs, VA 23075

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Call in: 7-9 pm Broadcast: 9-10 pm  
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Do you have a loved one/friend in a faraway Va. prison - Keen Mt., Red Onion, Wallens Ridge or surrounding local jails & federal prisons?

Every Monday, the WMMT “Calls from Home” radio show broadcasts brief messages from friends & family, faith-based communities & advocates to incarcerated people in Va. prisons, jails & federal facilities in SW Appalachia.



Photo by Phil Wilayto

**SHUT DOWN RED ONION!** -- About 40 people rallied Oct. 24 outside the headquarters of the Virginia Department of Corrections at 6900 Atmore Drive in Richmond. Speakers called for closing the Red Onion and Wallens Ridge state prisons and firing VADOC's top officials. Several relatives of prisoners spoke, including Aprii Wright, seen here addressing the crowd. The rally was sponsored by the advocacy group UPROAR, which is calling for another rally on Dec. 18. (See the announcement to the right.)

## THE GREATEST HEARTACHE (2025) \*

By  
Kevin “Rashid” Johnson

For the darker hue  
It remains like slavery of  
olden days  
At any moment  
One's dearest could be  
Sold away  
Or their existence  
Stole away  
Heartache wrenched from  
smiles  
On a day  
Begin with sunshine  
Defiled...  
Each moment lived  
Pregnant with fear  
Will the next be mine  
Whose life is likely  
To be torn asunder  
Whose child might be  
Going under  
The cold hard earth?  
The very life one  
birthed...

How does  
one give

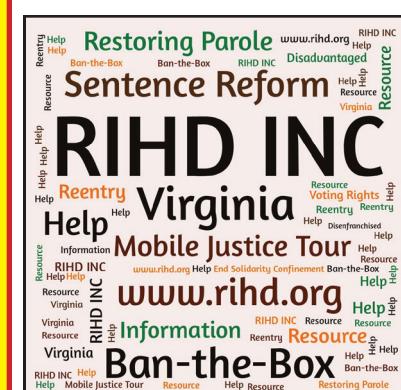
adequate  
Words or verse  
To the loss  
Of one's son or daughter?  
How grievous the cost  
Paid out of time, place  
and order  
Stolen by a heartless  
thief  
Pain that numbs  
And defiles  
Resentment that comes  
From time together too  
brief  
Words that express the  
deepest pain  
Are all too mild  
There is no grief  
That compares  
To the death of one's  
child

\* Dedicated to my son  
Kwaivon Dejesus, who  
was gunned down on Oct  
29, 2025 while attending  
a funeral in Richmond,  
Virginia, shortly after being  
released from prison.

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Mass  
Incarceration  
in Virginia

# SPECIAL REPORT: INSIDE VIRGINIA'S PRISONS

## One man's Red Onion story

By Donta Ebron  
Red Onion State Prison  
Pound, Va.

My name is Donta Ebron (1202596), and I'm writing to speak about my experience and the conditions at Red Onion State Prison.

I got here at Red Onion on June 26th, 2024, and when I arrived I was given clothes that were way too small, and when I asked for clothes I could fit, I was denied.

My inhalers were taken from me when I got here and it took weeks for me to get them.

When I arrived at Red Onion, I told the nurse in intake that I was No-Pork For Religious Reasons. I'm muslim. She documented it.

On July 2nd, 2024, during lunch, Feeding, officers Ellerbee and Officer in Training P. Fields were serving trays on the Top tier of A6. I'm in A626. When the officers got to my door with the Trays, I noticed Pork was on the Tray. I told both officers I'm muslim and I'm No-Pork and I'd like an alternate tray.

The officers tried to make me take the pork tray, but I refused it and asked them to call a supervisor. Officer Ellerbee started arguing with me and just walked off with the trays and did not call a supervisor or feed me.

At dinner time, the same two officers Fed Again, so I put my arm on the Tray slot and asked the officers to call a supervisor, because they denied me a Tray at lunch.

The officers refused to call a supervisor, and Officer Ellerbee pulled his can of mace off his hip and sprayed me in the face.

After he maced me, Officer Ellerbee and Fields began to grab my arm and twist my Arm and Fingers and began banging the tray slot on my arm, trying to force my Arm in the tray slot, hurting my arm.

I pulled my arm in the tray slot, and finally a supervisor came, but they put handcuffs on me and took me to medical.

I expressed to the nurses I couldn't breathe because of the mace. I have chronic Asthma and I take a shot every 2 weeks for it, but they didn't offer me decontamination from the mace and were rude to me.

When I was taken from medical, Officer Robbins, Lt. Massengill and another John Doe officer was taking me to D-building. Officer Rodobins was on my Right side and started pinching my Right arm. I told him I'd write him up.

Then both officers escorting me began to trip my legs, and they slammed my face on the concrete, causing permanent damage in my face.

Other officers responded, and one officer stuck his Finger in my eye socket,

trying to rip my eyeball out. Another officer stepped on my face, trying to cover my mouth and nose as if he was trying to stop me from breathing.

My family and other Advocates reached out to Richmond, and Special Investigator J. Acosta came to interview me. I made a statement that J. Acosta recorded.

I've since filed a 1983 in the US District Court in Roanoke, Virginia. It's in the Beginning Stage, but I've received a Case number, and I'm hoping that with this letter I can receive some help in further pursuing legal Actions against the officers and nurse involved.

Enclosed is the medical report, and you can see where the nurses say the officers decontaminated me from the mace, but on the Response from My Grievance, the Administration says I refused.

I was never offered decontamination. I stated earlier in this letter, I have chronic Asthma. The vents are never cleaned in our cells, and when Mace is used, it goes through the vents. I have trouble breathing here.

Red Onion is Dangerous on all levels. The food is horrible. Most of every tray is not edible. They are still serving a lot of processed meat here.

It's hard living here. I hope this letter can be used to help push for change. You can definitely publish my name. My experience needs to be heard.

I apologise for such a lengthy letter, but I hope to hear back. Thank you for your time, and all you do in helping prisoners

## No AC at Nottoway

By Yohannes Ramutu Shakhem  
Nottoway Correctional Center  
Burkeville, Va.

Recently on the news they spoke about Greensville and how the a/c went out. A lot of hell was raised about that, but I didn't see anything about Nottoway or Buckingham, neither of which has a/c! Today (7-8-24) they came and did a shakedown (annual) and confiscated all extra fans. (They even took the rat traps, which is strange, as it is a problem with rodents here) ... For one, the cells are way too small for two people, and add on top of that personal property also takes up space. Those extra fans are needed to not just to cool down your body, but to create a type of cool air flow as there is no ventilation. What's worse is the tragic situation of people held in the hole (now renamed RHU - Restorative Housing Unit). They have no access to their personal fans, plus their tray slots are kept closed. They are literally in a hot box!

In society, a person that leaves a dog in a hot car will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law! But an inmate in a hot cell ... While in the gym waiting to go back to the building after officers shook our cells down, one prisoner passed out due to the heat ... On record, the planet is heating up and there is no talk of ad-

dressing what to do for the incarcerated.

7-9-24: Approximately around 2:50 pm a female counselor passed out, as well as an older prisoner that just arrived here. The heat index is reported to be about 110 degrees, imagine how hot these cells are. The only question for society is, do you care?!

Strength & Solidarity!

## Low wages & high canteen prices

(Name withheld by request)  
Lawrenceville Correctional Center  
Lawrenceville, Va.

June 25, 2025: I know things are going up and getting tougher out there. But while food is going up in the streets, it's going up in here, but our pay is not being increased to match the cost of inflation inside of the prison walls.

When I first came into prison, soups were 20 cents, now 39 cents. Stamps were 25 cents, now 73 cents. Mackerel was 65 cents, and now \$1.65

Just as I am typing you this email, I was told that they have increased wages for some jobs (caretakers, pushers for wheelchair, teacher tutors, pris workers, peer mentors), but there are so many others who are deserving of pay raises, such as kitchen workers, barbers, commissary workers, custodial workers, floor techs and house workers.

## Desensitized

By Tevin McGougan  
Wallens Ridge State Prison  
Big Stone Gap, Va.

Desensitized by the news & coverage of crime.

Desensitized by politicians, as they mass marketing lies.

Deceived by the media & all the modern Julius Caesars.

As they poison our water, women & minds, saying our life's without meaning.

Who strung people upon ropes, after centuries of enslavement?

Who were dehumanized by propaganda excused by slavery coded in legislation?

Are people disillusioned to the blueprint shown on every television channel?

Ignoring repeated scenes of overt dreams, forgetting people were traded like chattel.

Word ... I don't know one man with the know-how to make fentanyl on the street.

But in prison, these same brothers overdosing with the addiction disease.

Whose receipts on the transit, when most ain't had a visit in 4 years?

Who's profiting while owning control of human bodies, using dogs to engrain fear?

It took lawsuits from solitary confinement to desegregate the prisons.

Did you know Biden made the law for no parole in Virginia?

Attached it to 85% of the time, how is this truth in sentencing?

It's like every fourth & goal, they throw a flag over justice...mandatory penalties.

Just cuz they show something all day on t.v. make u think it happens all the time.

What if we did what Trump or Biden did, would 3 million and counting be confined?

Numb, they signed 200 billion for missiles, our reparations went to Ukraine.

Our 40 acres came with denied parole & pardons, while the CIA flooded our neighborhoods with cocaine.

Behavior modification, fair seeming vices, get high enabled by artist like future.

Swept under the rug, our beautiful baby girls & boys, forced to endure countless waves of abuses.

Is it felt when no one rebuts, when exploiters lie, libel & slander us?

Maybe me speaking what we all are feeling will cause us to unite and begin standing up.

## Nottoway man asks for support for his clemency petition

David Bomber, 52, is incarcerated at the Nottoway Correctional Center in Burkeville, Va. Imprisoned since 2011, he has a release date of Oct. 39, 2045. David is asking people to sign his petition for Executive Clemency. His story is included in the petition, which can be found at: [chng.it/MwpbTVqZ](http://chng.it/MwpbTVqZ)

## Greensville prisoner asks for support for Conditional Pardon petition

Donte' Jamar Gwynn, 39, is incarcerated at the Greensville Correctional Center in Jarratt, Va., with a release date of April 13, 2044. He is asking that people sign his petition for a Conditional Pardon. The petition and a statement by Donte' is posted at [virginiadefender.org](http://virginiadefender.org) under "Prisoner Essays. You can also find both by searching for "Grant Conditional Pardon to Donte' Gwynn" at [www.change.org](http://www.change.org).

## Youthful Injustice

By Jamar Paxton #1121199  
Beaumont Correctional Center  
Beaumont, Va.

In Virginia, a bill was passed in 2020 granting persons convicted of a felony while under the age of 18 years old parole eligibility, as a result of a U.S. Supreme Court decision rendering life sentences given

## SPECIAL REPORT: INSIDE VIRGINIA'S PRISONS

to juveniles to be cruel and unusual punishment.

Parole eligibility means one must serve 20 years of their sentence before being "considered" for early release. The opinion in the U.S. Supreme Court's decision was based on scientific evidence that a man's mind and cognitive abilities won't develop until well into their twenties.

My issue is that this mercy extended to convicted felons under the age of 18 years old should also be extended to individuals up to the age of 21 years old. Reason being, the same scientific evidence that explains why this mercy should be allotted applies to individuals 18, 19 and 20 years old as well!

Furthermore, considering the laws in Virginia, there's an indication that one isn't an adult until they reach 21 years old. For example, a person isn't allowed to purchase tobacco, alcohol or a firearm until they are 21 years old. This is state law! Indicating one isn't an adult until they reach the age of 21 years old.

But if this same individual commits an offense against society, they are treated as an adult inside the courtroom.

Or the state will issue this individual a handgun, deport them to a foreign country and trust them to be mature enough to abide by international laws of war!

The state of Virginia picks and chooses when someone is an adult according to when it is convenient to them!

This is the epitome of INJUSTICE! This must be rectified. And the only way for that to be is by extending the juvenile parole eligibility up to the age of 21 years old.

I am calling on all advocates, media influencers, podcast influencers or passionate citizens that want to help me with pushing for the passing of this bill to reach out to me so that a plan of action can be developed, through emails to legislators, criminal justice reform groups on Facebook, reaching out to various organizations that specialize in coming to different states to advocate and setting up interviews with different podcasts for me to share my story.

Thank you for fighting for, and with me! I hope to hear from you!

Jamar Paxton #1121199  
Beaumont Correctional Center  
3500 Beaumont Road  
Beaumont, Va. 23014

### Through collective punishment, Va. officials prompt prisoners to violently police each other

By Kevin "Rashid" Johnson  
2025

If anyone needed further confirmation that Virginia's top officials can't be trusted to safely run the state's prisons, their recently created policy of collective punishment proves the case. The policy is not just dangerous, it's downright sinister.

At Va's notorious remote supermax prisons, Red Onion and Wallens Ridge, and their most updated version, River North, entire cellblocks of prisoners - some 88 men or more - are now formally punished if just one person in the block breaks a rule.

At Red Onion and Wallens Ridge it has been written into the rulebooks that not only are privileges like visitation, video calls, canteen, and educational and religious programs taken for one person's alleged misconduct, but the units must 'earn' their lost privileges back.

Besides the basic unfairness of punishing innocent people for others' actions over which they have no control, with this policy officials are deliberately prompting prisoners to violently police or administrate the cellblocks FOR THEM. They know that punishing entire units of men if they don't keep each other in line is creating license and inciting the 'strongest' individuals and groups to terrorize everyone else. Which is the unspoken purpose of collective punishment in a prison.

What's more telling is it's being done in a prison system plagued by critical staff shortages, which has been a constant theme in the media for a year now.

I've written several articles exposing how for decades officials at Red Onion and Wallens Ridge in particular have not just created prison gangs and manipulated bloody wars between them that previously didn't exist at all as a control mechanism and to create justification for the continued operations of these unneeded and expensive remote prisons, but also how they routinely use prisoners to carry out violent hits on those who officials dislike, can't control or who challenge them and their abuses.

This collective punishment policy formalizes these very practices.

Prison officials are astute at playing prisoners violently against each

other, and THIS is what underlies this new collective punishment policy coming from the top.

Ask yourself: How else might men in the volatile prison environment control the behaviors of huge groups of other men who they don't know and who owe them no obedience except by fear and violence? And the MOST VIOLENT are the ones with the greatest ability to control whole units. Officials KNOW this. It is a deliberate administrative maneuver to have prisoners act as auxiliary guards and police the units for them. The SAME officials who forever spout rhetorical claims of "zero tolerance" for violent groups, group violence and so on.

If the obvious escapes you, just imagine if the cops did this in your community - if they incited the most violent groups on the streets to enforce 'order' for them. But people on the streets can defend themselves. Prisoners cannot.

Prisoners therefore have the right to be protected from harm. Over 30 years ago, in the case of Farmer v. Brennan, the U.S. Supreme Court established that prison officials must provide humane conditions of confinement. That the beating or stabbing of one prisoner by another serves no "legitimate penological objective."

In this context, the court held that having stripped prisoners of the means of self-protection, having confined them with people deemed dangerous, and having foreclosed their ability to enlist outside support, officials may not sit by idly and "let the state of nature take its course." Therefore, it established that the Eighth Amendment imposes a constitutional duty on prison officials to "protect prisoners from violence at the hands of other prisoners."

What Va officials are doing, however, is the EXACT OPPOSITE. They are in fact inciting and giving license to prisoners to commit violence against each other. And the sinister catch-22 that they are knowingly creating is they are inciting this violence under circumstances where most victims can't seek their intervention or legal redress, as they could if they were beaten by guards.

In prison culture, prisoners are forbidden from informing staff when they become victims of threats or violence from other prisoners. To report this is to become a "snitch," which both besmirches their character and puts them in greater danger.

To add insult to injury, those prisoners who willingly act out vio-

lence for officials are in fact acting as agents (in-house rule enforcers for officials), and are typically already informants themselves. These are the ones given privileged statuses and informal license by staff to break rules and receive contraband for controlling units for them.

These are dynamics of the prison environment that prisoners and officials know and understand well. Dynamics that I speak to in my newsletter "InsideOutsideUnity #2," where I discuss the common practice of prisoners informing by spreading misinformation and rumors for officials against other prisoners that officials dislike, fear or can't control. And how this practice acts as a gateway for prisoners becoming full-on agents and policing other prisoners for them. This new policy of collective punishment formalizes this practice of using prisoners to violently police each other.

What Va officials are doing is neither new nor unique, and they KNOW IT is illegal.

In fact, the most dangerous and inhumane U.S. prisons historically were those where officials used prisoners to police each other. Texas proved one of the most well-publicized cases, as a result of a decades-long class action lawsuit brought by the legendary prisoner activist, David Ruiz, titled Ruiz v. Estelle, where officials used inmates as guards under a "Building Tender" system ...

In Texas, the "Building Tender" system was justified by prison officials as needed to compensate for extreme staff shortages.

Va officials have now legitimized their long-standing practice of manipulating prisoner-on-prisoner violence, using the thin disguise of collective punishment - a tool of both control and continued abuse of men in its most remote and racially polarized prisons.

In this way, their abuses continue by proxy, and in a way that they can claim plausible deniability for the resultant harm to prisoners, namely the injuries and deaths inflicted. And, as in Texas, inmate informants and agents are being used as auxiliary guards to supplement for shortages in staffing.

Yet another reason Va's top administrators, director Chadwick Dotson and operations chief Arnold David Robinson, must be fired and these unneeded, expensive, remote prisons Red Onion and Wallens Ridge closed down.

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