

2023 General Assembly Report

General Update

Legislative Composition

Republicans held all three seats in the Executive Branch. In the 40-seat Senate, Democrats held a 22-18 majority over Republicans; while in the House of Delegates, Republicans held a 52-48 majority. Lieutenant Governor Winsome Sears presided over the State Senate, consistent with her responsibilities as lieutenant governor. Delegate Todd Gilbert (15th District) served as the Speaker of the House of Delegates.

The General Assembly meets for 60 days in even-numbered years and 30 days in odd-numbered years.

Workforce

VaOurWay championed six bills focused on apprenticeships and workforce development.

Apprenticeships

HB 1384 would have modified certain licensure requirements for individuals who have completed apprenticeships. The proposed bill outlined the criteria for a person to obtain a license through an apprenticeship, creating another pathway to get more qualified individuals into highly sought after positions. **This was not signed into law.**

Workforce

Sometimes, in order to support and grow our workforce, it requires organizing the government to be more efficient in meeting the needs of Virginians. HB2195 created a Department of Workforce Development. The proposed bill would house the more than three dozen state agencies and programs related to workforce development under a single department, streamlining efforts and removing redundancies. This was a three-decade effort involving multiple governors before it was signed into law.

There were a couple of bills evaluating the feasibility of licensure by reciprocity with other jurisdictions. **Both bills - HB 2146 and HB 2251 - were signed into law.**

HB 2146 tasked the Virginia Board of Social Work to convene a work group to examine licensure by reciprocity with other jurisdictions and report back to the General Assembly. Additionally, the bill evaluated joining the Social Work Compact if and when that Compact takes effect.

HB 2251 focused on licensure requirements of dentists and dental hygienists. Per the bill's language, the Department of Health Professions is tasked with assembling a work group to review its licensure requirements and evaluate the feasibility of a licensure by endorsement pathway. Like HB 2146, this work group will report back to the General Assembly, specifically the House Committee on Health, Welfare and Institutions and the Senate Committee on Education and Health.

There is a nursing shortage in Virginia, especially given the burnout of healthcare workers due to the COVID-19 crisis. HB 2211 is an attempt to address the shortage by streamlining the process for internationally trained nurses to be tested and certified for work in the Commonwealth. These nurses are still expected to complete an education program approved by a licensing board in a foreign country, demonstrate proficiency in English, and delegate to the Board of Nursing the responsibility of establishing the required framework for verifying the credentials. **This bill was signed into law.**

Education

Staffing Gaps

VaOurWay prioritized addressing staffing gaps and rewarding excellence in teaching via HB 1424. The bill attempted to create incentives for hard to fill positions in underfunded school systems to ensure students have equitable access to education. HB 1424 would also reward top performing teachers identified by the Department of Education by offering performance bonuses, which is good for morale and retention. **This bill was not signed into law.**

Early Childhood Education

Participation in Early Childhood Education programs have been proven to increase long term educational success. HB 1423 created a Commission on Early Childhood Education and provided funding to support early childhood education efforts in the Commonwealth. These coordinated efforts can help reduce the achievement gap between children of different socioeconomic backgrounds and improve overall cognitive development. **This bill was signed into law.**

HB 1698 exempts any child day program offered by a local school division that meets a set of parameters from licensing requirements by the Board of Education. Local school divisions now have the flexibility to design programs for their student population and easily implement them to support their students. HB 1698 offers more opportunities for child day programs, to the benefit of children and working parents. **This bill was signed into law.**

Campaign Reform

Campaign Finance Reform

Virginia has lagged behind its counterparts in implementing adequate campaign finance reforms. Virginia struggles with inadequate disclosure which allows candidates to spend with no accountability. Additionally, 47 states prohibit the personal use of campaign funds; Virginia is an anomaly in allowing this to be permissible. **HB 1552 and HB 1826 would have prohibited the personal use of campaign funds, but both were not signed into law.**

In fact, both bills were referred to House subcommittees where they were killed. Failed attempts by Virginia lawmakers to adhere to what is effectively a national standard to prohibit personal use of campaign funds continues to show a lack of desire for any form of accountability to their constituents and donors.

Ranked-Choice Voting

There were four ranked-choice voting bills that would have implemented ranked-choice voting for president primary voting and no longer only permit ranked-choice voting at the local level for members of a county board of supervisors or city council but allow all local governing bodies or school boards to also do so.

Here's how ranked-choice voting works:

1. Voters list their top candidates in order of preference; the candidate they would most like to see win is ranked first, followed by their second choice, and so on.
2. If a candidate wins 50 percent or more of the first-choice votes, they win the election.
3. If there is no candidate with a majority of the votes, then the candidate with the least number of first-choice votes is eliminated.
4. Every individual that voted for the eliminated candidate now has their second-choices tallied and added to the candidates still in consideration.
5. This continues until there is a candidate who has won 50 percent or more of the votes cast.

Proponents of ranked-choice voting argue that RCV elections are more effective in reflecting the true preferences of voters because of the broad base of supporters required to win. A candidate in a plurality voting system could win even if they don't receive the majority of votes; whereas, an RCV electoral system would require someone to win 50 percent or more of the vote, making it more likely that the winner in an RCV system reflects the desires of the electorate. Other arguments in favor of RCV include: encouraging more candidates outside the two dominant political parties and mitigating the impact of third-party "spoiler" candidates.

Despite the proposed benefits, HB2301, SB1380, HB2118, and HB1751 were not signed into law.

Local Government Accountability

VaOurWay championed SB1495, which provided accountability to localities acting in bad faith. The proposed bill, which was ultimately signed into law, provides recourse to a person in the form of recovery of legal fees for local administrative actions that are against state law.

The bipartisan nature of support played an important role in ensuring the bill's passage, as opponents argued that it would lead to an increase in legal challenges against local governments and that it would dissuade localities from actively pursuing enforcement actions. Despite those concerns, policymakers agreed with VaOurWay and understood that SB 1495 would not hinder localities but provide accountability in situations where violations against state laws happen. SB 1495's passage now gives a person needed recourse without necessarily impeding local government's enforcement abilities. It also serves as a potent deterrent against local governments exceeding their authority.

Conclusion:

VaOurWay's mission is to champion good governance in Virginia by promoting non-partisan and informed discourse between citizens and legislators. While not all our legislative priorities were signed into law, we are pleased that our elected officials did recognize the merit of strengthening our workforce, the importance of early childhood education, and providing accountability to localities acting in bad faith. VaOurWay will continue to champion our policy objectives that did not pass in the 2023 legislative session.