

SENATE OF VIRGINIA



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HEALTH FINANCE

REPORT OF THE 2014 SESSION OF THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The 2014 session of the General Assembly of Virginia began just before the inauguration of the newly elected Governor, Terry McAuliffe, Lt. Governor, Ralph Northam, and Attorney General, Mark Herring. Soon after, two new Democratic Senators, Jennifer Wexton and Lynwood Lewis, were sworn-in to replace former Senators Northam and Herring.

With the Senate 20-20 and the new Senate President a Democrat, the Senate reorganized. I was named chair of the Rules Committee and also assigned to Commerce and Labor, Courts of Justice, Education and Health, and Finance committees.

In June Senator Phil Puckett, Democrat from Russell County, abruptly resigned and the Republicans gained a 21st seat in a special election held in August. In September, the new Republican majority re-reorganized the Senate stripping Democrats from chairmanships and other committee assignments. I now serve on the Courts of Justice, Privileges and Elections, and Transportation committees.

The power sharing which occurred when I first came to the Senate no longer applies. Even worse, contentious ways we see in Washington appear to have come to Richmond. Nevertheless, some important work was done this year.

MENTAL HEALTH REFORM

Due to the tragedy afflicting Senator Creigh Deeds and his family in November 2013 (when his mentally ill son, Gus, took his own life after attacking the senator), a top priority became reforming the mental health system. The resulting legislation included extending the time for assessing and finding a bed for a person deemed a danger to himself and others from 4 hours to 8 hours and ensuring that the Commonwealth would provide a facility as a last resort. The new law also established a commission chaired by Senator Deeds to continue examining ways to make improvements in the mental health system. Additional funding for the mental health system was provided to make up for the loss of \$42 million, which had been added in 2008 following the Virginia Tech tragedy.

AMTRAK TO ROANOKE

Amtrak is coming to Roanoke! A passenger train station is being planned for Norfolk Avenue south of the tracks between Jefferson and Henry Streets. Same seat service will be available from Roanoke to Boston by 2017.

The “connector bus” to the Lynchburg Amtrak station, started with funds I obtained in 2011, has proven there is a market for Amtrak. Ridership has continued to grow averaging around 50 passengers per day. The “connector bus” leaves the Roanoke Civic Center parking lot daily (and from Blacksburg and Christiansburg on Friday, Saturday and Sunday) for the Lynchburg Amtrak station with destinations in the northeast, including Washington, New York and Boston. Free parking is available until the return trip.

The outgoing Governor signed a \$92 million agreement with Norfolk-Southern to improve the rail lines between Roanoke and Lynchburg so Amtrak could be extended to Roanoke. A study is under way to determine the site of an Amtrak station in the New River Valley, the next stop.

There is great excitement in both Valleys for the coming of Amtrak. I am continuing to work to bring Amtrak to Western Virginia as a major priority to advance the future of our region.

MEDICAID EXPANSION THWARTED

The new governor vowed to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) to cover up to 400,000 new citizens. Some \$2 billion of our federal tax dollars is available to cover Virginia citizens making under 138% of the federal poverty level. These dollars would allow poor people to have a family doctor and compensate physicians and hospitals for their services. Absent this coverage, indigent care is only available at emergency rooms, where treatment is more expensive and patients are often sicker, or at free clinics.

In order to provide emergency room services for indigents, hospitals must shift costs to those who pay, including the insureds, thereby increasing health insurance premiums by up to 10%. Thus, expansion of Medicaid would serve to relieve health insurance costs.

Under the Affordable Care Act, a premium subsidy on a sliding scale is available to persons making above the federal poverty level to four times that, but persons making less than the federal poverty level are not eligible for the subsidy and often cannot afford private insurance. Thus, without expansion of Medicaid, those making less than the federal poverty level will not likely have any health care coverage.

The U. S. Supreme Court, unfortunately, ruled states are not required to accept expansion of Medicaid. Virginia is one of the states so far refusing to take back our own federal tax dollars to close the “coverage gap” for our own poor people.

The battle over expanding Medicaid became overtly partisan. Conservative Republicans refused to vote for expansion even though studies show the additional funding could create 30,000 new jobs, and expansion is funded 100% by federal dollars for the first three years, and 90% by federal dollars thereafter. Over ten years, our Commonwealth’s budget would save \$1.1

billion and the new federal dollars would bring billions into the Virginia economy. The hospital association, physician groups, chambers of commerce and many business groups support drawing down these federal dollars for health care in order to close the “coverage gap”.

The drama over expanding Medicaid continued throughout the spring causing a budget stalemate, which lasted until June. The governor believed he had sufficient authority to accept Medicaid funding under existing language in the budget. Then, Senator Puckett abruptly resigned four days before the scheduled budget approval session, leaving Democrats down to 19 senators. When the budget was brought up for passage, all 20 Senate Republicans unexpectedly united with House Republicans and passed the “Stanley amendment” prohibiting the Governor from using treasury funds to expand Medicaid. Even the three moderate Republicans, who earlier voted for Senator Watkins’ Market Place Virginia version of Medicaid expansion, voted for the Stanley amendment.

Polls show a majority of Virginians support closing the “coverage gap” using the federal dollars. As we end 2014 and plan for the 2015 session, Medicaid expansion remains the most important issue facing Virginia, and I will continue seeking ways to close the “coverage gap”.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Based on an experience by the Roanoke County Police Department, I introduced legislation (Senate Bill 373) to outlaw “human trafficking”, a modern version of the slave trade for sex and labor. Vulnerable young people, both male and female, lured by promises of jobs, gifts and sometimes drugs, become victims of a modern form of human bondage. They have little or no family support or financial means, and are impressionable and easy prey. Paid little or nothing, they may be held and used for prostitution or other labor from which they cannot escape.

Existing abduction laws are often inadequate because the victims initially go willingly on false promises. Thus, new legislation is necessary to protect victims from this growing national and international problem. My bill passed the Senate, but was held up in the House of Delegates Courts of Justice Committee. I intend to pursue this legislation again in 2015.

RENEWABLE ENERGY

I sponsored a Senate study (Senate Resolution 47) to look at ways to expand the use of solar and other renewable energy. Most people believe promoting renewable energy sources is important to protect the environment and help deal with climate change.

JUDICIAL ELECTIONS

Legislation passed in 2014 authorizes 429 judges in Virginia at all levels, but the new budget funded only 396 judges still leaving many judicial vacancies. The importance of a well-funded and functioning court system, both for criminal and civil cases, cannot be overstated. Timely access to a fair and impartial judiciary is essential to social, political and economic order. Fully funding the judiciary must be a priority.

This year, we were able to fund and elect new judges for the Roanoke and New River Valleys: former Delegate Onzlee Ware and Frank W. Rogers, III, from Roanoke to the Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court in the 23rd District, Stephanie Murray Shortt from Floyd County to the Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court in the 27th District, and the Honorable Brad Finch from Montgomery County elevated to the Circuit Court in the 27th Circuit.

EARLY LEARNING

I introduced a resolution (Senate Bill 372) for the Secretary of Education to study ways to expand early learning for four year olds. Pre-School or Early Learning programs have proven successful to a child's future education and success in life. This is an issue I have worked on in the past and will continue to pursue because it is so important to our children and the future economic and social welfare of our Commonwealth.

ROANOKE HIGHER EDUCATION CENTER

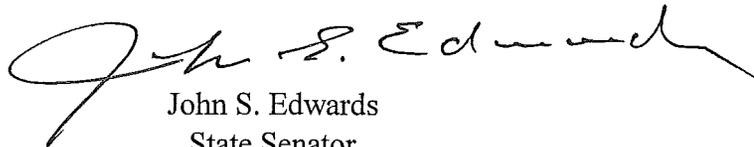
The Culinary Arts Institute operated by Virginia Western Community College at the Claude Moore Education Complex has been remarkably successful. Students are able to obtain an Associate Degree qualifying them to become executive chefs and operate their own restaurant. Because of high demand for the program, funding was secured this year for expansion of the facility to enable enrollment in the program to double in size. Expanding our workforce training programs at the Roanoke Higher Education Center continues to provide more job opportunities for our region.

The Roanoke Higher Education Center's main building is undergoing renovation of the brick exterior and roofing. The exterior of the classic art deco building, built by the Norfolk and Western in 1931, was showing its age with water intrusion and other problems. The exterior renovation being undertaken should protect the building for another 50 years. Other buildings its age – such as the Chrysler and Empire State buildings – have had similar work done.

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Representing the 21st Senatorial District continues to be fulfilling and rewarding service which I enjoy every day. Please share your views on my website www.johnedwardsva.com or email me at senator@edwardsva.com or at distict21@senate.virginia.gov.

Sincerely,



John S. Edwards
State Senator

Authorized by Senator John S. Edwards
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