



ELECTION 2021

## Cheat sheet: Youngkin and McAuliffe on the issues

BY: NED OLIVER, KATE MASTERS, GRAHAM MOOMAW AND SARAH VOGELSONG - NOVEMBER 1, 2021 12:04 AM



📷 Gubernatorial candidates Terry McAuliffe, a Democrat, left, and Republican Glenn Youngkin. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

*As the race for governor comes to a close, here's a look back at the stances Democrat Terry McAuliffe and Republican Glenn Youngkin have staked out on major policy issues.*

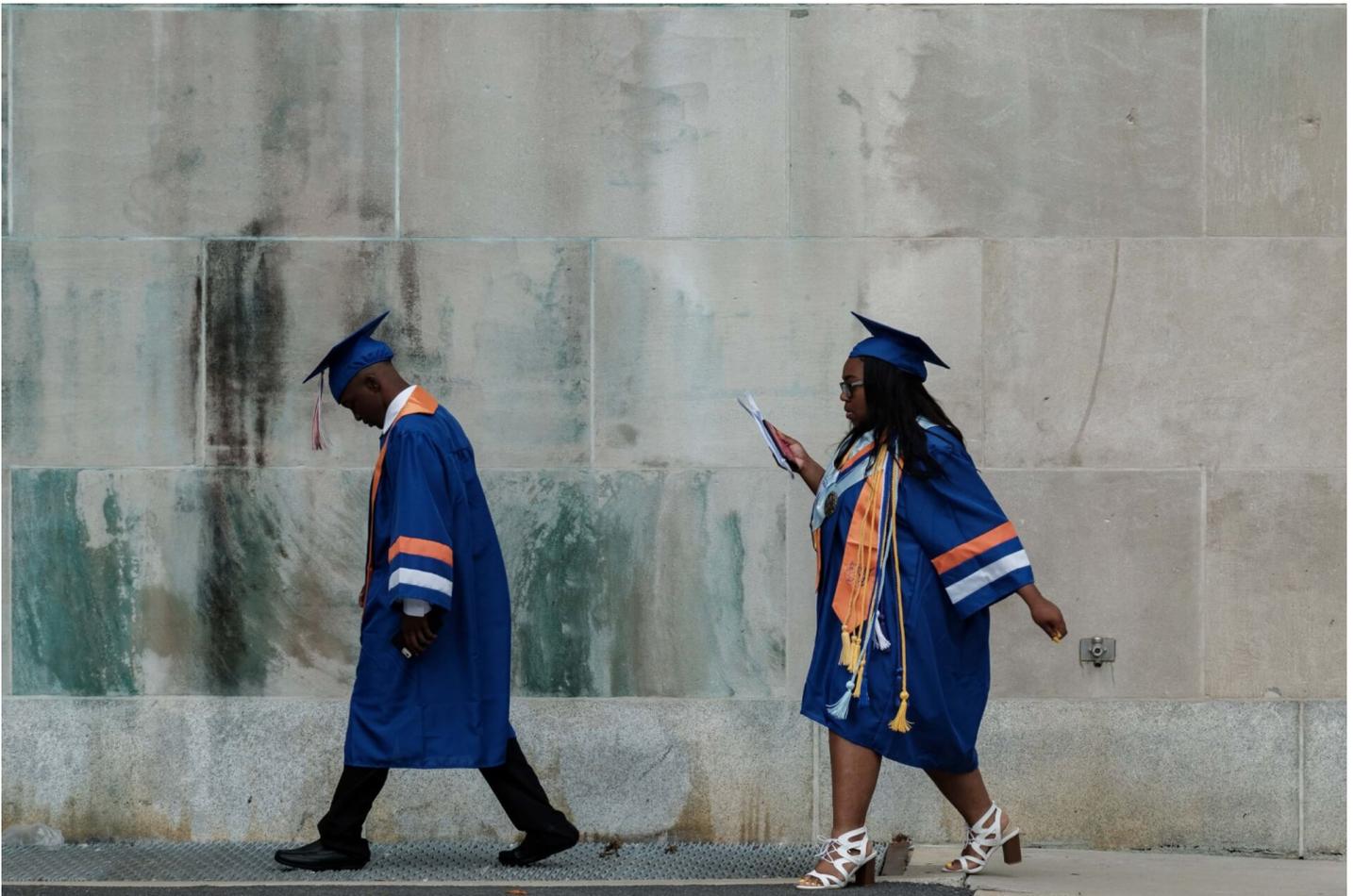
### Education

Public education has become the dominant issue of Virginia's gubernatorial race. But in the last weeks of the campaign, both candidates have focused less on [funding formulas](#) and [school](#)

[construction](#) – some of the most pressing needs facing schools across the commonwealth – and more on [controversial literature](#) and other cultural flashpoints.

First, the basics. At the start of his campaign, McAuliffe released a [six-page plan](#) pledging “the largest increase in education investment in the history of Virginia.” He’s promised more funding to raise teacher salaries above the national average, expand access to preschool and fully adopt the Standards of Quality recommended by the Virginia Board of Education – guidance for staffing ratios, class size and other school resources.

Youngkin’s “[Day One](#)” [plan](#) offers less detail, but he’s committed to building at least 20 charter schools across Virginia to “provide choice” to parents. He’s also called for every school in the state to place a [law enforcement officer on campus](#) or lose out on state funding.



Richmond Public Schools seniors outside their graduation ceremony. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

It’s Youngkin’s pledge to ban critical race theory, though, that’s become the centerpiece of his campaign. The [largely academic](#) concept isn’t part of Virginia’s statewide learning standards, but the term is often used to encompass [broader equity efforts](#) or lessons that focus on historical instances of racism. In Loudoun County, for example, [one parent complained](#) that his second-grade daughter learned Christopher Columbus enslaved and killed indigenous people. Another example conservatives point to is an “Antiracism 101” seminar hosted on the [Virginia Department of Education’s YouTube page](#) as part of a state equity summit for educators and school administrators, which included a slide titled “interrogating whiteness.”

“Critical race theory has moved into our school system and we have to remove it,” Youngkin [said in August](#), promising to ban the concept “on day one.” His campaign has promised to “stand up for teachers and parents,” and he’s supported a Loudoun County educator who was suspended after [speaking against](#) the district’s policy requiring that transgender students be addressed by the pronouns they identify with. He has also [pledged](#) to include funding in his budgets for all five of Virginia’s historically black colleges and universities.

Youngkin has also [criticized McAuliffe](#) for [vetoing a bill in 2017](#) that would have required school districts to notify parents when students are assigned reading materials deemed “sexually explicit.” The legislation originated with opposition to Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” in Fairfax County. McAuliffe responded, “I don’t think parents should be telling schools what they should teach kids.”

McAuliffe has largely dismissed Youngkin’s attacks on critical race theory as racist, describing them as “[a dog whistle](#)” in one recent roundtable. And his closing ads have accused Youngkin of “wanting to ban books by prominent Black authors.”

## **Economy, jobs and taxes**

Both candidates are pitching themselves as job creators, with McAuliffe touting his record of landing big economic development deals during his first term and Youngkin saying he’ll bring new perspective as someone who just left the business world for politics.

Building on Democrats’ push to make Virginia friendlier to workers as well as executives, McAuliffe says he’ll require employers to offer paid sick days and family medical leave, ideas that have been discussed in the Democratic-led General Assembly but have yet to be broadly implemented. He has also called for speeding up planned increases in the state’s minimum wage, getting it to \$15 per hour by 2024. With respect to labor organizing, McAuliffe wants to extend collective bargaining rights to state employees, but he has signaled Virginia’s right-to-work law won’t be repealed if he wins a second term.

Youngkin contends that’s not a sure bet, noting McAuliffe once indicated he would sign right-to-work repeal if it got to his desk.



📷 Tammy Bragg works the grill at the Texas Inn in Lynchburg. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

With little room to attack Virginia’s business climate given the state’s top ranking from CNBC, Youngkin has zeroed in on cost-of-living issues and promises to cut tax bills. He has proposed doubling the standard deduction for state income taxes, one-time tax rebates, restrictions on “runaway property taxes” and eliminating the state’s grocery tax. Youngkin has also campaigned against business shutdowns tied to COVID-19.

Both campaigns have pushed out studies from their political allies claiming their opponents’ fiscal plans are mathematically untenable.

McAuliffe has said Youngkin’s tax policies, including the GOP nominee’s aspirations of eliminating the state income tax altogether, would inevitably blow up the state budget and bring major service cuts. Youngkin has claimed McAuliffe’s ambitious spending plans couldn’t be covered by existing revenues and could lead to tax hikes.

## Criminal justice

Youngkin’s campaign has made crime and police central to his general election campaign, arguing Democrats have made the state less safe with a [slew of criminal justice reforms](#) passed last year.

His campaign cites crime data that shows [murders hit a 20-year high](#) last year, though the same data shows the overall crime rate actually decreased and, in either case, the laws in

question had largely not gone into effect yet.

Youngkin [has said less](#) about what he intends to do on the issue as governor. In addition to his promise to require a police officer in every school, he's said he will fire the parole board, which was at the center of a contentious state Inspector General's Office investigation [into violations of rules and procedures in its release of a string of violent offenders](#). He also says he would "fully fund law enforcement," though he has not elaborated on what that might entail.



📷 Police guarded the Rotunda at UVA on Aug. 11, 2018, in Charlottesville, the anniversary weekend of the deadly white supremacist rally that left one dead and dozens injured. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

McAuliffe, meanwhile, has laid out [detailed plans](#) to continue the criminal justice reform initiatives set in motion last year. That includes promises to [eliminate mandatory minimum sentences](#), hire more public defenders, fund police accreditation efforts and bring new rehabilitation programs to state prisons, including a [nursery program](#) for prisoners with newborn children.

And rather than fire the parole board, he says he hopes to expand access to parole, which the state abolished in 1995.

McAuliffe also backs banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines – a measure that has [failed](#) to muster enough Democratic support to pass the legislature. Youngkin has promised to roll back restrictions on firearms.

Both men say they support increased funding for community violence prevention programs. And both now say [they oppose rolling back qualified immunity for police officers](#) accused of misconduct – something McAuliffe said he supported during the primary but walked back during his first debate with Youngkin.

## Health

Any focus on health in Virginia’s governor’s race has largely boiled down to two issues: COVID-19 and abortion.

Publicly, McAuliffe and Youngkin have sparred over measures like masking and vaccinations, still key in efforts to bring an end to the pandemic. McAuliffe has [supported a mandate](#) to require masks in school buildings and released [a plan to boost vaccination rates](#), including using federal rescue money to incentivize vaccine requirements by private employers.

Youngkin, on the other hand, has [explicitly said](#) “there should not be a statewide school mask mandate” in Virginia. He’s also [opposed vaccine mandates](#), though he’s encouraged Virginians to get the shots voluntarily.

Abortion, too, has become a prominent campaign topic for McAuliffe since Texas [effectively banned the procedure](#). Around the same time, the Supreme Court agreed to hear a case that could present a [serious challenge](#) to Roe V. Wade, its landmark 1973 abortion rights decision. With access potentially under threat, Democrats have seized on the opportunity to emphasize the importance of individual state protections.



📷 A basket of syringes containing the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine ready to be used at Richmond Raceway in Richmond, Va., February 2, 2021. (Parker Michels-Boyce/ For the Virginia Mercury)

“I’ll say this again to every woman watching tonight – I will protect your rights,” McAuliffe said at one debate in September. He’s cited his own record in vetoing legislation that would have [blocked funding](#) to Planned Parenthood, and he’s supported recently passed measures that [rolled back](#) many of the state’s abortion restrictions. In one radio interview, he also said he wouldn’t have vetoed a [controversial proposed bill](#) from Del. Kathy Tran, D-Fairfax, that would have eased certain restrictions on late-term abortions (though Politifact described it as a [flip-flop](#) on previous statements).

Youngkin, for his part, has described himself as “[unabashedly pro-life](#).” [In debates](#), he’s said he would support the reinstatement of some abortion restrictions and a bill that would ban the procedure after 20 weeks of pregnancy with exceptions for rape and incest.

Other health issues haven’t gotten much airtime from either campaign, though McAuliffe has [released plans](#) to strengthen Medicaid, expand health care access and [lower drug costs](#). Youngkin has [supported investments](#) in the state’s [struggling mental health hospitals](#).

## Climate change and sea level rise

McAuliffe has outlined [a detailed plan](#) for responding to climate change, quoting President Joe Biden’s statement that “climate change is the existential threat to humanity” and calling a

transition to clean energy essential “to protect Virginians from the long-term threats of climate change.”

Youngkin meanwhile has walked a careful line on the subject, despite a broad scientific consensus that carbon emissions are a primary driver of climate change. During an [October roundtable](#) at Norfolk State University, Youngkin said that while he knew climate change is a challenge, particularly in Hampton Roads, he didn’t know what’s causing it. Asked if “humans play any role at all in the warming of the earth,” he skirted the question and called it “one of these topics that, candidly, people are trying to use to divide people.”

Both candidates have emphasized the need for funding to help combat sea level rise in Hampton Roads, which is experiencing the fastest rate of any city on the East Coast. Both have also touted the possibilities of [a project](#) that is pumping treated wastewater back into the Potomac aquifer to offset sinking land.



📷 A flooded road outside Richmond. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

Youngkin has accused state government of not doing enough to help coastal regions address rising sea levels and pledged to put together an independent committee to raise funds and contract for projects in the region. He also praised a referendum Virginia Beach voters will face on Tuesday that would raise real estate taxes to pay for flood protection projects.

McAuliffe has said he’ll seek federal grant funding to help with the issue, prioritize restoration of wetlands that can serve as natural coastal protections and pursue a full coastal study of the

state with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that has been stalled at the federal level. He has also noted that in his prior term he was responsible for Virginia's first steps toward joining the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a multistate carbon market that puts a price on carbon emissions and then redistributes proceeds back to the states.

Since Virginia began participating in carbon auctions this year, it has generated \$64 million earmarked by law for [flood protection efforts](#).

## Energy

Youngkin and McAuliffe flatly disagree on Virginia's current course toward transitioning the electric grid away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy.

Youngkin said in a [Sept. 28 debate](#) that the 2020 [Virginia Clean Economy Act](#) is “unworkable” and that he wouldn't have signed it. The law set a 2050 deadline for the grid to go carbon-free, mandated that Appalachian Power and Dominion Energy propose large amounts of solar and wind facilities, and imposed binding energy efficiency and renewable portfolio standards on both utilities, among other provisions.

During an [earlier debate on September 16](#), he said Virginia should “embrace all aspects of power generation – wind, solar, nuclear and our clean-burning natural gas” and warned that accelerating the transition to renewables would result in “blackouts and brownouts and an unreliable energy grid.” He also criticized the cost of shifting away from fossil fuels, saying it will increase customers' electric bills by up to \$1,000 annually. (State regulators agree that it will raise rates, but estimated [a slightly lower rise of \\$800 a year](#).)



📷 One of two wind turbines off the coast of Virginia Beach that comprise Dominion Energy's Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind pilot project. (Sarah Vogelsong/ Virginia Mercury)

McAuliffe meanwhile has thrown his support behind the Clean Economy Act and said he would like to see the 2050 carbon-free deadline moved up to 2035.

In an [issue brief on clean energy and climate change](#), he pledged to improve energy efficiency by raising the standards the state's two largest electric utilities are mandated to meet, expand commercial and residential solar and accelerate transportation electrification. He also expressed support for redesigning parts of Virginia's system of electric utility regulation to be more outcomes-based, calling for Virginia "to rebuild the incentive structures that drive" Appalachian Power and Dominion.

McAuliffe has repeatedly framed clean energy as a net positive for Virginia, saying that "when I think of clean energy, I think of jobs" and emphasizing the possibility of Hampton Roads becoming a hub for the offshore wind industry.

## Civil Rights

Throughout the campaign, McAuliffe has emphasized his role in restoring the voting rights of more than 173,000 people convicted of felonies, which he says is more than any other governor in the nation.

If reelected, he says he would go further and pursue a constitutional amendment that would automatically restore voting rights, which would bring Virginia in line with much of the rest of the nation.



Sen. Adam Ebbin, D-Alexandria, the first openly gay person elected to the General Assembly, spoke in favor of the Virginia Values Act last year. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

Youngkin’s campaign has attacked McAuliffe’s efforts on voting rights, noting that the action also made it easier for ex-offenders to also have their firearms rights restored.

McAuliffe also says he would pursue additional protections for LGBTQ Virginians, including anti-bully legislation for students and repealing a so-called “conscience clause” that permits state-funded adoption agencies to refuse to serve LGBTQ people.

Youngkin has largely avoided weighing in on the issue, but told the Associated Press that he feels “called to love everyone.” However, pressed as to whether he intended to convey support for same-sex marriage, he said no. Youngkin’s staff then abruptly ended the interview.

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## NED OLIVER



Ned, a Lexington native, has been a fulltime journalist since 2008, beginning at The News-Gazette in Lexington, and including stints at the Berkshire Eagle, in Berkshire County, Mass., and the Times-Dispatch and Style Weekly in Richmond. He is a graduate of Bard College at Simon's Rock, in Great Barrington, Mass. He was named Virginia's outstanding journalist for 2020 by the Virginia Press Association. Contact him at [noliver@virginiamercury.com](mailto:noliver@virginiamercury.com)

### MORE FROM AUTHOR

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## KATE MASTERS



An award-winning reporter, Kate grew up in Northern Virginia before moving to the Midwest, earning her degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. She spent a year covering gun violence and public health for The Trace in Boston before joining The Frederick News-Post in Frederick County, Md. While at the News-Post, she won first place in feature writing and breaking news from the Maryland-Delaware-DC Press Association, and Best in Show for her coverage of the local opioid epidemic. Before joining the Mercury in 2020, she covered state and county politics for the Bethesda Beat in Montgomery County, Md.

### MORE FROM AUTHOR

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## GRAHAM MOOMAW



A veteran Virginia politics reporter, Graham grew up in Hillsville and Lynchburg, graduating from James Madison University and earning a master's degree in journalism from the University of Maryland. Before joining the Mercury in 2019, he spent six years at the Richmond Times-Dispatch, most of that time covering the governor's office, the General Assembly and state politics. He also covered city hall and politics at The Daily Progress in Charlottesville. Contact him at [gmoomaw@virginiamercury.com](mailto:gmoomaw@virginiamercury.com)

### MORE FROM AUTHOR

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## SARAH VOGELSONG



Sarah is the Mercury's environment and energy reporter, covering everything from utility regulation to sea level rise. Originally from McLean, she has spent over a decade in journalism and academic publishing and previously worked as a staff reporter for Chesapeake Bay Journal, the Progress-Index and the Caroline Progress. She is the recipient of a first place award for explanatory reporting from the Society of Environmental Journalists and has twice been honored by the Virginia Press Association as "Best in Show" for online writing. She was chosen for the 2020 cohort of the Columbia Energy Journalism Initiative and is a graduate of the College of William and Mary. Contact her at [svogelsong@virginiamercury.com](mailto:svogelsong@virginiamercury.com)

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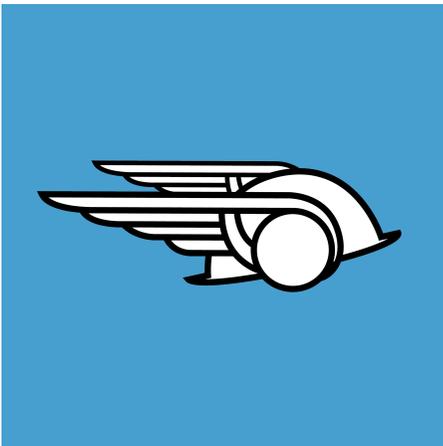
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GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2021

GOVERNMENT + POLITICS

# Democrats have controlled Virginia government for two years. Here's what they've done.

BY: NED OLIVER, SARAH VOGELSONG, GRAHAM MOOMAW AND KATE MASTERS - MARCH 3, 2021 12:03 AM



📷 Gov. Ralph Northam, flanked by incoming Senate Majority Leader Dick Saslaw and House Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn, outlines Democrats' priorities for the 2020 legislative session. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

In 2019, voters handed Democrats unified control of Virginia government for the first time in 21 years, guaranteeing the party at least two years of unfettered lawmaking before the next election.

This year's House of Delegates elections and race for governor will be a debate largely over whether Democrats delivered what most Virginia voters wanted or changed too much too fast.

Here's a look at the consensus agenda that emerged as lawmakers worked to squeeze a generation's worth of pent-up legislative desire into a few short legislative sessions.

## Elections and voting

Making it [easier to vote](#) was a top priority when Democrats took control, and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the pace of change to Virginia's once-strict election laws.

Democrats passed bills to open absentee voting to anyone who wants to cast a ballot early or vote by mail, not just those who have an acceptable excuse. That change came just as the virus arrived, bringing with it a massive spike in absentee voting (almost 60 percent of voters cast absentee ballots last year) that have transformed how Virginia elections work. Legislators also approved ballot drop-off boxes, prepaid postage for ballot return envelopes, and a formalized process allowing voters to correct errors with absentee paperwork.

The new majorities have taken significant steps on voter access, repealing Virginia's mandatory photo ID rule, making registration near-automatic through the DMV, and passing a state-level voting rights law that creates a stricter review process for any local election changes that might discriminate against racial or linguistic minorities. Legislators also teed up more sweeping reform in the future by giving initial approval to a [constitutional amendment](#) that, if passed again next year and approved by voters, would automatically restore felons' voting rights upon release from prison.

More election reforms originally passed in 2020 will be coming online in the future. A bill allowing [ranked-choice voting](#) in local races takes effect this year, and legislation allowing same-day voter registration is scheduled to begin for the 2022 general election.

Republicans have repeatedly said the election-law overhaul has sown confusion and opportunities for fraud. Democrats have [dismissed those claims](#), saying they perpetuate baseless theories that the voting system is susceptible to widespread manipulation.



📷 Coal fired units at Dominion Energy's Chesterfield Power Station would close by 2024 under the Clean Economy Act that passed the General Assembly last year (Ryan M. Kelly/ For the Virginia Mercury)

## Climate change

Before Democrats regained power, the state had passed no significant laws aimed at addressing climate change. In short order, policies began bubbling up just as surely as tidal floods in a Hampton Roads storm sewer.

In 2020, [they passed the landmark Virginia Clean Economy Act](#), which sketches out a roadmap for the state's two largest electric utilities to go carbon-free by 2050 and sets binding annual targets for renewables adoption and energy efficiency. And in conjunction with the Clean Energy and Community Flood Preparedness Act, it commits Virginia to [participation in a carbon market](#) known as the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative.

In 2021, efforts shifted to transportation, which is responsible for roughly half of Virginia's carbon emissions. Lawmakers [committed to more stringent transportation emissions standards](#) set by California and shared by 14 other states, as well as a requirement for a certain percentage of vehicles sold in Virginia to be electric. Other laws that have passed [begin studying and building out electric vehicle infrastructure](#), although legislators [failed to provide any funding for a rebate program](#). And a little-noticed bill will create a task force to examine the [potential of carbon sequestration](#).

Some members of the more progressive wing of the Democratic caucus in the House unsuccessfully pushed their colleagues to go further, criticizing the Clean Economy Act for not moving fast enough and faulting the chamber’s leadership for blocking consideration of a Virginia version of the Green New Deal in favor of an approach they view as overly deferential to electric utilities.



Thousands of demonstrators rallied for better teacher pay and more public school funding during a January 2018 rally at the Capitol. (Ned Oliver/ Virginia Mercury)

## Education

When Democrats took control of the General Assembly, they pledged to increase funding for education – [touting it as a priority](#) for the 2020 session.

A year later, investments have increased while falling short of the [nearly \\$1 billion](#) that the state’s Board of Education says is necessary to fully fund public schools. This year’s compromise budget includes close to \$50 million for school divisions to hire [additional support staff](#) such as counselors, nurses and social workers. It improves the ratio of support positions to students, but falls short of fully meeting the board’s recommended Standards of Quality – the minimum guidelines for staffing, instruction and other areas of accreditation.

After [deferring teacher raises](#) at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, legislators capped this year’s session with a 5 percent pay increase for educators. But analysts at The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis, a nonprofit Richmond think tank focused on how policy affects

low- and moderate-income people, says the language gives local school divisions the flexibility to reduce their share [down to 2 percent](#), which would then decrease the state’s match.

“In practice, it means that not every teacher is going to see a 5 percent raise next school year,” said Chad Stewart, TCI’s manager of education policy and development. Overall, per-pupil funding increased under the state’s Democratic majority – especially unusual given an anticipated budget shortfall, according to Stewart.

“But the issue at hand is the level of investment still doesn’t come close to the level of funding our state experts say is necessary,” he said.

In higher education, Democrats delivered on one of their biggest priorities – free community college for low- to middle-income students. This year, the General Assembly nearly unanimously [backed a bill](#) to fund tuition for students in high-demand fields. It was a [campaign promise](#) for Gov. Ralph Northam.



©(Getty Images)

## Health

Virginia [expanded Medicaid](#) before Democrats took control of the General Assembly, allowing hundreds of thousands of previously ineligible Virginians to gain coverage. But in the two years since, they’ve made significant changes to the state health care exchange in an effort to stabilize enrollment and lower the prices on premiums.

Last year, lawmakers voted to [establish a state-run marketplace](#) that would reserve more funding for outreach and enrollment efforts. The goal of the exchange, scheduled to debut in 2023, is to bring on new consumers who would diffuse the cost of premiums.

This year, the General Assembly also approved a [reinsurance program](#) funded through federal waivers, state revenue and a small assessment on insurance companies. Recommended by the same workgroup that suggested a state-run exchange, the program aims to offset claims from high-risk patients, lowering the costs for other consumers.

“Reinsurance is really targeted at that demographic that’s struggling,” said Sara Cariano, a policy specialist for the Virginia Poverty Law Center, in an interview last month. “Right now, it’s really expensive to get insurance when you don’t get any help.”

Even as Democrats have bolstered the exchange, they’ve avoided more drastic changes to the state’s insurance landscape. A [bill filed this year](#) by Del. Ibraheem Samirah, D-Fairfax, directed the state’s Joint Commission on Health Care to contract a study on the cost of universal insurance. But the legislation died in a Senate committee with bipartisan opposition.

Abortion is one area where Democrats have made sweeping changes. [In 2020](#), lawmakers repealed the state’s mandatory ultrasound and 24-hour waiting period. This year, they voted to [repeal a ban](#) on abortion coverage for plans offered through state exchange.

## Minimum wage

Democrats voted to [raise the state’s minimum wage](#) to \$12 an hour over the next three years – the first increase the state has seen since 2009, when the federal minimum went up to \$7.25 an hour.

The agreement represents a substantial increase – with the first bump to \$9.50 an hour scheduled to go into effect in May – but it falls short of the \$15-an-hour minimum many Democrats campaigned on.

Democrats in the House and Senate found themselves [at odds over the proposal](#), with the House pushing for \$15 and the Senate worrying the figure was too high for businesses, particularly in rural areas, to pay.

They’ve agreed to revisit the issue in 2024.

The two chambers have also disagreed over which categories of workers should be included, with the House pushing to include agricultural workers and the [Senate twice refusing](#).

They were similarly divided over other labor issues, with the Senate scaling back a bill that will allow public sector unions for the first time, but [only at the local level](#) and only if approved by local elected officials.

One area where House and Senate lawmakers found agreement was an [unwillingness](#) to repeal the state’s [right to work law](#), which bars compulsory payment of union dues as a condition of

employment.

The impasse led to one of the more dramatic moments in the House of Delegates this year when Del. Lee Carter, D-Manassas, [unsuccessfully attempted](#) to use a procedural maneuver to force a vote on the House floor.



📷 Men wearing Hawaiian prints adopted by the far-right Boogaloo movement stand outside Capitol Square with rifles during a pro-gun rally in Richmond on Monday, Jan. 18, 2021. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

## Guns

Before winning their majorities, Democrats made it clear they wanted to pass tighter laws to prevent potentially dangerous people from having access to guns and allow firearm bans in more public places. They [mostly delivered on that front](#), but they've stopped short of outlawing specific types of weaponry.

They made background checks mandatory for all gun sales in 2020. Legislators built on that step this year by lengthening the amount of time the Virginia State Police can take to complete a background check from three business days to five business days, leaving more time for vetting without purchases going through by default due to paperwork delays. The legislature also sought to limit access to firearms by passing a [red flag law](#), which allows authorities to temporarily seize guns from people deemed a threat, and reinstating the one-handgun-a-month rule.

Democrats have also pushed for gun bans at places like government buildings, parks and at events like political rallies and protests. A law passed last year [gave local governments more leeway](#) to ban guns at public events, and legislation approved this year codified gun bans for Capitol Square, state buildings and polling places.

A proposed ban on assault weapons, which drew an intense backlash from gun-rights supporters in late 2019 and early 2020, [failed to win enough support](#) to pass the more moderate Senate. A proposal to ban so-called ghost guns, untraceable firearms assembled at home from kits or 3D printers, met a similar fate in the Senate this year.

Del. Marcus Simon, D-Fairfax, the bill's sponsor, said he got the impression some of his colleagues believed they had already done enough on gun policy.

“There was just a feeling that they didn't want to have that fight again,” Simon said.



📷 Correctional officers stand at the entrance to the Greenville Correctional Center on Nov. 10, 2009, near Jarratt, Virginia. Greenville is home to the state's execution chamber. (Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images)

## Criminal justice

From [abolishing the death penalty](#) to [legalizing marijuana](#), Democrats enacted sweeping reforms touching all aspects of the state's criminal justice system.

Many of the policies were the product of a special legislative session last year that followed nationwide protests against police brutality, including laws that [went into effect this month](#) banning no-knock police searches, limiting the use of chokeholds and authorizing the attorney general to investigate local police departments. They also passed an obscure-but-far-reaching bill that eliminates what defense attorneys have come to call the “[jury penalty](#).”

This year, lawmakers agreed to more reforms, including legislation that will for the first time allow people to have some past convictions on their [records sealed](#) – a step Democrats hope will make it easier for them to rebuild their lives after prison.

But the reforms rarely went as far as advocates hoped and were often mired in bitter disputes between leaders in the House and Senate. Legislation to legalize marijuana [nearly failed in the final hours](#) of this year’s session and the compromise that ultimately passed won’t go into effect until 2024. A bill that originally intended to ban police departments from obtaining military weapons was rewritten to only apply to [obscure equipment such as bayonets](#).

And many proposed reforms failed entirely, including legislation aimed at [making it easier to sue police officers for misconduct](#) and a bill that would have [repealed most mandatory minimum sentences](#) from state code – something leaders in both the House and Senate called a priority but were nonetheless unable to reach an agreement on.

Democrats have also demonstrated reluctance to use their majorities to address prison conditions, voting down bills that would have [abolished private prisons and jails](#), reestablished [independent oversight](#) of the Department of Corrections and imposed strict limits on the use of [solitary confinement](#).

## Civil rights

The party has taken both concrete and symbolic steps on matters of freedom and equality. After his yearbook blackface scandal, Northam led an effort to repeal [nearly 100](#) outdated, discriminatory laws still on the books. This year Democrats extended that symbolic step to LGBTQ rights, voting to [repeal a ban on gay marriage](#) still in the state Constitution, which was invalidated by a 2015 Supreme Court ruling.

Democrats also put in place a range of new civil rights protections, making it easier to raise discrimination claims of all types in state court with the [Virginia Values Act](#) and for the first time explicitly banned discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in housing, employment and public accommodations.

On immigrants’ rights, lawmakers passed bills that extended [driver privilege cards](#), in state tuition and financial assistance to undocumented immigrants living in Virginia.

And legislation that allowed local governments to [take down Confederate statues](#) preceded the removal of 71 monuments and memorials this year, according to statistics tracked by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

There have been moments of disharmony and unease with the pace of reform. Democrats in the Senate were unwilling to repeal language in the state code that explicitly authorizes [faith-based adoption and foster care agencies to refuse to serve LGBTQ families](#) and people of other religions – a policy the GOP put in place in 2012 over strenuous objections from Democrats. The measure passed the House but was withdrawn after lawmakers in the Senate amended it to cut state funding but allow the agencies to continue to operate, a compromise the House deemed unworkable.

“The whole idea of having this balkanized, state-sanctioned discrimination is something I couldn’t live with,” said the bill’s sponsor, Del. Mark Levine, D-Alexandria.



📷 Transmission lines in Louisa County. (Ned Oliver/ Virginia Mercury)

## Utility reform

Democrats have remained deeply divided on electric utility reform over the past two years, with many House members joining with a cadre of Republicans in that chamber to push for a set of changes to state code that would restore much of the authority of Virginia’s public utility regulators, the State Corporation Commission, to regulate rates and earnings. Powerful members of the Senate however, with longstanding ties to the utilities, and particularly Dominion Energy, have been reluctant to relinquish legislative control, even amid regular reports of excessive profits by the monopolies.

## Bipartisan coalition looks to reform Virginia's system of electric utility regulation

As the 2021 General Assembly session begins, lawmakers are set to consider a slate of bills that aim to reform Virginia's system of electric utility regulation with the goal of bringing down customer bills. "This work is an extension of the work we did last session to commit Virginia to massive clean energy investments," said ... Continue reading

One high-profile effort, the Fair Energy Bills Act of 2020, garnered solid bipartisan support in the House but [was struck down in the Senate](#). This year, a slate of proposals that sought to correct what their sponsors described as an imbalance in regulatory power ahead of Dominion's first earnings review in six years [were also scrapped by the Senate Commerce and Labor Committee](#).

Still, the array of proposals put forward by House Democrats and [a surprise success by reformers in 2020](#) on a bill that returned to the SCC its traditional power to set the period of time over which the costs of early power plant retirements can be recovered indicate ongoing shifts in how the legislature views its relationship with utilities. And although this year's reform bills all failed, pressure in the Senate has led to a request for the reconvening of the dormant Commission on Electric Utility Regulation to take a more comprehensive look at the existing regulatory system.

## Campaign finance

In his 2007 autobiography, former Gov. Terry McAuliffe, a prolific Democratic fundraiser, said his father taught him "money in politics was neither evil nor good."

“Money in politics was like gas in the tank, it was what you needed to get where you were going,” wrote McAuliffe, now seeking a second term as governor.

If the last two sessions are any indication, Democrats like their trajectory.

Several attempts to rein in Virginia’s wide-open campaign finance system by capping contribution amounts or limiting corporate donations have [gone nowhere](#) in the Democratic-led legislature, despite reform being a popular issue among progressives.

A less-sweeping proposal to ban politicians from converting campaign funds to their personal use, a rule that exists at the federal level and almost every other state, passed the House of Delegates this year but [died in the state Senate](#). Gov. Ralph Northam [called for campaign finance reform](#) while running in a Democratic primary in 2017, though he hasn’t been able to convince fellow Democrats, who now wield legislative power and the fundraising advantages that come with it.

Campaign finance reformers argue it’s a good-government step to reduce the influence of wealthy donors over state affairs and boost confidence that policy is being written with the general public’s interests in mind. Skeptics in the legislature have warned a clampdown might have unintended consequences by encouraging the creation of dark-money groups operating outside existing transparency rules.

The General Assembly approved [a resolution](#) this year to study the prospects for comprehensive campaign finance reform in the future.

The report isn’t due until Nov. 1, meaning candidates running in this year’s statewide elections and House of Delegates contests, which will determine whether Democrats keep power, will have few legal limitations on the amounts they raise and spend on their campaigns.

## Taxes

Though the Democratic majorities have rewritten swathes of state policy to make Virginia more culturally progressive, they’ve shown less appetite for addressing economic disparities by changing the tax code.

Del. Vivian Watts, D-Fairfax, the chairwoman of the House Finance Committee is hoping to get that conversation started through a comprehensive study on how the state can boost the “progressivity” of the individual income taxes, which make up almost 70 percent of the state’s general fund revenues.

“And yet every year, insidiously, the burden of the individual income tax falls harder and harder on those having the least ability to pay,” Watts said as she presented her proposal to the House of Delegates.

Under the existing system, the top bracket starts at \$17,000 in taxable income, a number that hasn’t changed since 1990.

The legislature approved [Watts' resolution](#) calling for the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission to study the issue and make recommendations in time for the 2023 session.

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**NED OLIVER**  

Ned, a Lexington native, has been a fulltime journalist since 2008, beginning at The News-Gazette in Lexington, and including stints at the Berkshire Eagle, in Berkshire County, Mass., and the Times-Dispatch and Style Weekly in Richmond. He is a graduate of Bard College at Simon's Rock, in Great Barrington, Mass. He was named Virginia's outstanding journalist for 2020 by the Virginia Press Association. Contact him at [noliver@virginiamercury.com](mailto:noliver@virginiamercury.com)

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**SARAH VOGELSONG**  

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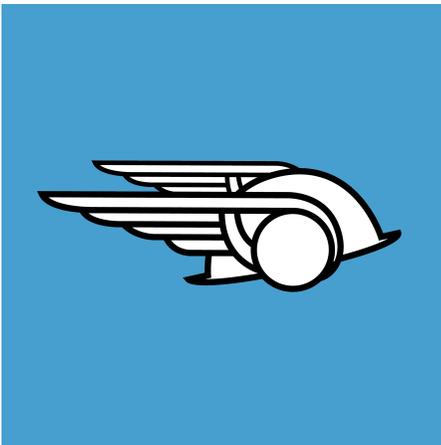
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COVID-19 GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2021

# Helicopters, cash payments and a new public health lab: How state agencies propose spending Virginia's rescue fund money

BY: GRAHAM MOOMAW, KATE MASTERS, SARAH VOGELSONG AND NED OLIVER - JULY 8, 2021 12:03 AM



 The Virginia Capitol at sunrise. (Ned Oliver/ Virginia Mercury)

Virginia has \$4.3 billion in federal aid to spend and no shortage of ideas.

State agencies hoping to tap into American Rescue Plan funds have submitted [wish lists](#) that top more than \$18 billion, floating proposals ranging from new helicopters for Virginia State Police to \$1,000 cash payments for essential workers.

Gov. Ralph Northam's administration hasn't committed to specific line items, but lawmakers are scheduled to convene next month for a special legislative session to decide how to spend the money.

Discussions are ongoing over whether some of the requests are or aren't eligible for the federal dollars, which are supposed to have a direct link to the negative effects of the pandemic.

Furthermore, the federal government has earmarked certain funds for specific purposes, such as combating student learning loss due to schools going virtual during the pandemic. And because the state can spend the funds over several years, policymakers may choose to set some money aside to adapt to future needs. Federal dollars put toward some initiatives may also free up state dollars for others not eligible for relief funding.

Most of the spending proposals put forward, from vaccine outreach and utility assistance to fixing the unemployment system and broadband investment, won't come as a surprise.

Other spending suggestions are a little less intuitive – or show agencies trying to use the sudden influx of funds to advance efforts that may have been back-burnered in tighter budget years.

Here's a sampling of the proposals that caught Mercury reporters' eyes.

## **Compensation for essential workers**

### ***Price tag: \$800 million***

Labor proposals include a suggestion to give \$1,000 "hero grants" to low-wage essential workers who stayed on the job during the pandemic.

The funding request for \$700 million doesn't specify exactly which types of workers might qualify, but notes that "premium pay" for essential workers is an explicitly authorized use of the funds.

Higher education officials have also requested up to \$100 million for "hero scholarships" to help essential workers who want to further their education. The proposal suggests giving up to \$5,000 per year to assist essential workers with getting a GED or college degree.



📷 Jason Chadwick, left, who has worked for Kroger for 20 years, leads other workers in a chant demanding the reinstatement of hazard pay during a protest outside of the Kroger on Lombardy in Richmond, Va., September 3, 2020. (Parker Michels-Boye / For the Virginia Mercury)

## **COVID resources for non-native English speakers**

### ***Price tag: \$21 million***

A persistent complaint throughout the pandemic has been the state's dependence on automatic (and often shoddy) translations to provide information about the spread of COVID-19 and roll out of vaccines to non-English speakers.

The approach at one point led the Virginia Department of Health to inform Spanish speakers that **“the vaccine is not necessary”** where English speakers were informed that it is not required.

Northam's Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion proposes setting aside \$5 million a year to pay for translation services, as well as hiring a coordinator to create a statewide language access plan for translation needs for state agencies. The office also proposes hiring two full time American Sign Language interpreters and a coordinator dedicated to “incorporating people with disabilities and other access and functional needs” into the state's emergency and recovery plans.

The rescue fund money would cover four years of work.

## **A bailout for the state's unemployment trust fund**

*Price tag: \$1.3 billion*

One of the biggest single requests comes by way of the Virginia Employment Commission, which wants \$1.3 billion to restore the state's unemployment trust fund to pre-pandemic levels.

The state relies on the fund to pay for unemployment benefits, which saw an unprecedented 1.3 million initial claims last year and another 300,000 already this year – more than double the applications for assistance the state saw in all of 2019.

The fund would otherwise be rebuilt through a series of hefty payroll tax increases on businesses. And state leaders and the business community have already called heading that off [a top priority](#).



📷 A parking lot outside a UVA dorm was filled with hundreds of state police cruisers in advance of the one year anniversary of the Unite the Right rally in 2017. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury – Aug. 8, 2018)

## **Body cameras and helicopters for state police**

*Price tag: \$40 million*

In one of the more tangentially pandemic-related requests, Virginia State Police asked for \$19 million to roll out body cameras to their officers.

The department argued that “vulnerable social populations” have seen some of the biggest impacts from COVID and have some of the lowest rates of vaccine acceptance “due to fears and skepticism towards government resulting from systemic marginalization.”

The agency proposes that body cameras will help because they foster transparency that in turn “will establish trust in government and mitigate future spread of COVID-19.”

Their justification for requesting two new helicopters at a cost of \$21 million was more clear cut. The agency says they will replace two older units currently used for medical evacuation flights that were “experiencing unacceptable downtime” and “impacting the department’s ability to provide air ambulance services during the COVID-19 public health emergency.”

## **Highway improvements between Richmond and Williamsburg**

*Price tag: \$100 million*

The only major road project included in the funding requests is the continued widening of Interstate 64 between Richmond and Williamsburg.

Specifically, transportation planners are suggesting \$100 million to help with the costs of widening the interstate in a 29-mile stretch between New Kent County and Williamsburg.

Mitigating congestion on I-64 has been a top priority for Hampton Roads-area leaders.

The request specifies that the new improvements would begin around Exit 205 in New Kent, where a previous widening project between Richmond and New Kent ended in 2019, and continue to exit 234 near Williamsburg.

Capital projects unrelated to COVID-19 generally aren’t intended to be funded through the American Rescue Plan, but the act gives states leeway to spend money on things like roads if the pandemic affected government revenue sources that would typically pay for them.

## **Mapping overlaps between historic inequities and urban green spaces**

*Price tag: \$500,000*

In 2020, a study co-authored by Science Museum of Virginia chief scientist Jeremy Hoffman [made national headlines](#) when it found that neighborhoods federal housing officials historically classified as “hazardous” because of their high proportion of low-income and minority residents [are hotter than other neighborhoods](#).

The classification, known as redlining, was used by the federal Home Owners’ Loan Corporation between the 1930s and 1968 to guide banks on granting mortgages to homebuyers and led to wide racial gaps in homeownership.

It also contributed to higher temperatures today in historically minority or disadvantaged neighborhoods, where shade-providing trees are in short supply and large swathes of land

have been paved.

Now the Virginia Department of Forestry wants to use \$500,000 to develop heat island maps that pinpoint where higher temperatures overlap with formerly redlined neighborhoods.

The agency says that “federal guidance aligns funding” with projects such as those that aim to create green infrastructure and improve water quality, both of which can be achieved by planting trees and other flora.



📷 An electric vehicle charges at a public station in Henrico County, July 2020. (Sarah Vogelsong/Virginia Mercury)

## Electric vehicle infrastructure

*Price tag: \$33.3 million*

With federal guidelines allowing funds to be used to replace lost public sector revenues for services including infrastructure, the Department of Transportation is proposing a hefty investment of \$33.3 million in electric vehicle infrastructure.

Democrats in the General Assembly and the Northam administration spent the last legislative session [pushing electric vehicles as a way to reduce transportation emissions](#), Virginia’s largest contributor to carbon emissions.

Money was a sticking point, though. Lawmakers acknowledged that infrastructure is lacking in many rural areas. And although the General Assembly signed off on an electric vehicle

rebate program, [legislators left it unfunded](#), a situation the law's sponsor attributed to tight pandemic budgets.



📷 A tour of the construction of the new Highland Springs High School in Henrico, estimated to cost about \$80 million. (Henrico County Public Schools)

## School construction and improvements

*Price tag: \$2.6 billion*

Even before the pandemic, school construction was a major issue in Virginia. A recent survey from the state's Department of Education found that more than half of public school buildings are more than 50 years old. Replacing those aging structures is estimated to cost the state more than \$24.7 billion.

Enter the American Rescue Plan. The federal government set aside specific funds for [pandemic-related improvements](#), including new HVAC systems, but VDOE proposes dedicating an additional \$2 billion for more general renovation projects. That money would be delivered to local school divisions through a competitive grant fund, according to the agency's request.

The department is also requesting an additional \$600 million for improvements in early and higher education. The majority of that – \$500 million over the next three years – would go toward capital improvements for “successful” child care operators, “allowing them to serve additional children and help more parents get back to work.”

Another \$100 million is proposed for modernization efforts at the state’s public colleges and universities, from updated heating systems to new equipment and technology.

## **A new public health lab**

*Price tag: \$275 million*

Virginia’s public health laboratory – once mostly a site for specialized testing and [tracking rare diseases](#) – has taken on a whole new importance throughout the pandemic.

For the first critical weeks, it was the [only lab in the state](#) that could test for COVID-19. And over the past year and a half, its responsibilities have expanded dramatically, from [sequencing samples of the virus](#) to [rapidly detecting new variants](#).

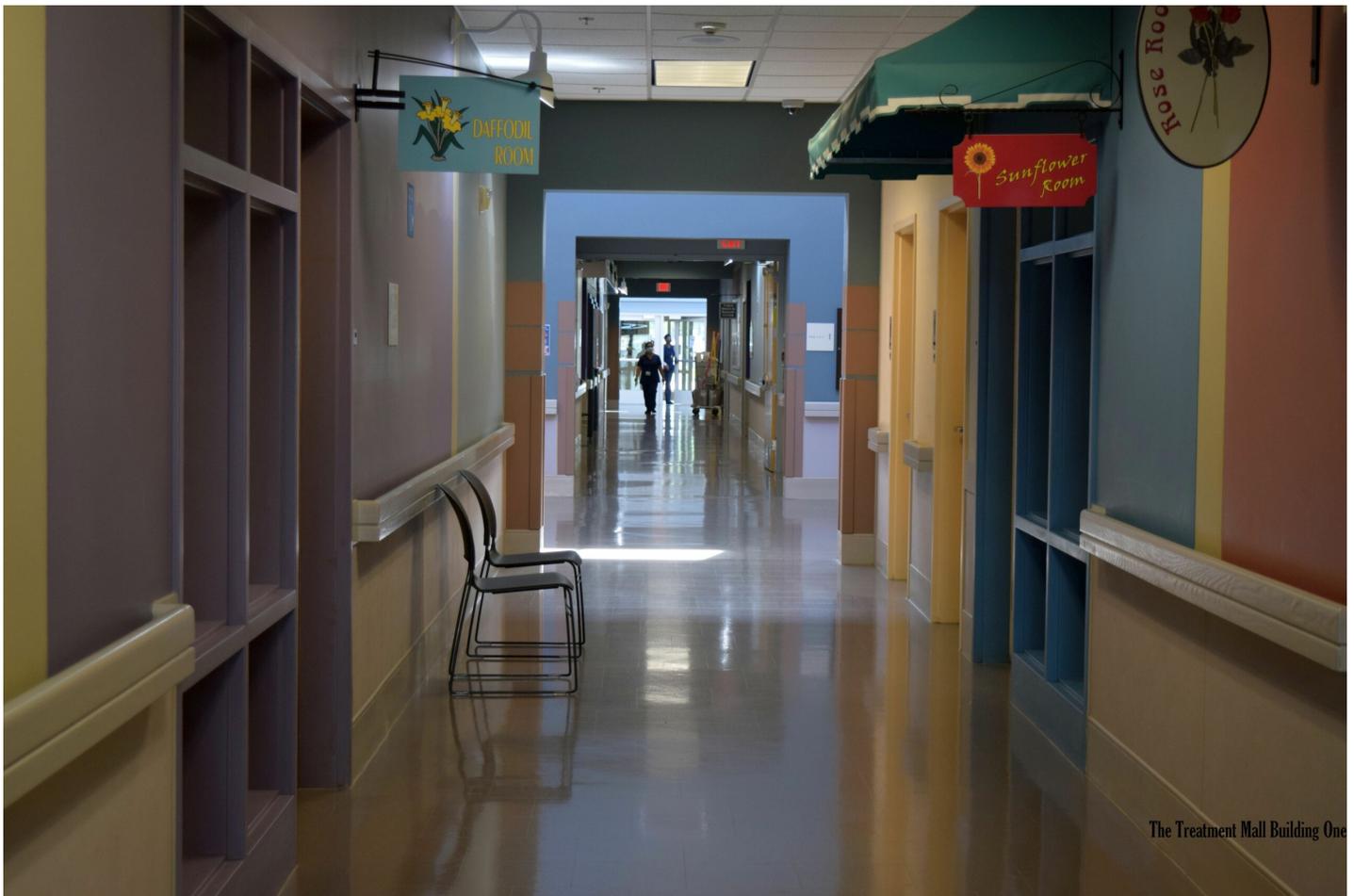
The Virginia Department of General Services wants to expand those capabilities even further. The agency is asking for \$275 million to replace the state’s aging site in downtown Richmond with a “state-of-the-art” new laboratory in Petersburg. The proposed location is on the same campus as Central State Hospital, a state-run psychiatric facility that’s currently undergoing a [major renovation](#). And it would boost capacity for complex and high-volume testing, which is already “nearing its limit” at the existing lab, according to DGS.

## **A public health emergency fund**

*Price tag: \$10 million*

The scramble to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic can be traced, in large part, to [decades of underfunding](#) in public health. As Virginia was recording its first cases, some health departments in low-income counties [were abruptly closing their doors](#). And across the state, employees were pulled from critical services like maternal health and environmental monitoring to serve as case investigators or contract tracers.

In those early days, the Virginia Department of Health said it lacked the funding to “quickly ramp up an appropriate operational response.” Now, the agency is requesting \$10 million for a public health emergency fund. The money might not be used immediately, but leaders say it would give the department more agility to respond to future pandemics.



📷 Eastern State Hospital in James City County (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services)

## Staffing at state mental hospitals

*Price tag: \$335.5 million*

Virginia's state-run mental hospitals have been struggling for years with rising admissions. But the COVID-19 pandemic pushed them into [crisis mode](#), with outbreaks making it even more challenging to discharge patients and free up bed space.

That high patient volume, combined with [chronic staffing shortages](#), have made the facilities "[tremendously unsafe](#)," according to Alison Land, commissioner of the state's Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. The agency is requesting more than \$300 million over the next several years to boost employment, the majority of which would go to salary increases for essential frontline workers. Another \$24 million would be dedicated to security guards and safety improvements at aging facilities.

The department is also requesting millions for community mental health services – part of an ongoing effort to reduce admissions through better front-end treatment. But staffing needs have often been framed as one of the most urgent challenges facing Virginia's beleaguered mental hospitals.



📷 The sun sets over the James River in Richmond. (Ned Oliver/Virginia Mercury)

## **Septic and sewer overflow repairs and replacements**

*Price tag: \$230 million*

One of the biggest-ticket items Virginia’s Department of Environmental Quality has on its wish list is \$230 million to help repair and replace failing septic systems, pipes that send waste directly into waterways and “combined sewer overflow” systems that can lead to sewage releases during heavy rainfall.

The federal rescue plan “specifically lists water and wastewater infrastructure as an eligible use,” DEQ says in its justification for the request.

Of the \$230 million, DEQ wants to see \$30 million go to Richmond to speed up its ongoing overhaul of the city’s combined sewer overflow system. The agency has also identified \$35 million worth of sewage system fixes in Southwest Virginia, as well as millions of dollars of investment in wastewater connections for underserved communities in Surry, Middlesex, Northampton and Accomack counties.

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Dispatch and Style Weekly in Richmond. He is a graduate of Bard College at Simon's Rock, in Great Barrington, Mass. He was named Virginia's outstanding journalist for 2020 by the Virginia Press Association. Contact him at noliver@virginiamercury.com

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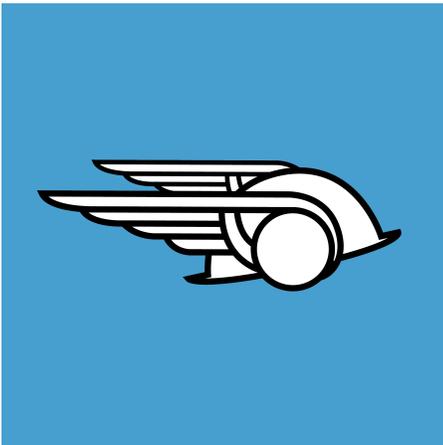
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