

## 2021 Special Session Recap: How VPLC's Budget Priorities Fared

When the General Assembly convened for a special 2021 session, we urged lawmakers to prioritize Virginians hit hardest by the pandemic with a budget focused on equity. Not all of our priorities were funded, but we will continue to push for these in the state's next budget. Below, here's how our recommended budget priorities fared during this special session.

### Housing

VPLC recommended allotting \$500 million to create new housing units that are affordable to Virginians with income below 60% of the area median income as well as implementing a requirement that landlords seek rent relief money before evicting tenants. Unfortunately, no money was designated to create affordable housing. But in some good news, the requirement that landlords apply for rent relief before evicting tenants was reinstated through June 2022.

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### Family & Child Welfare

We originally recommended several priorities to improve family and child welfare in Virginia, including funds for family and domestic violence survivors, assistance for families to access the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit, upgrades to the state's child welfare information system, and child abuse prevention. Of these recommendations, our priorities of nearly \$9 million for child abuse prevention and roughly \$13 million for services to victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence were funded.

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### Food Assistance

VPLC's recommendation for an alternative declaration that extends increased SNAP benefits to low-income families was approved outside of the special session.

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### Unemployment

We originally recommended several improvements to the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC), including \$1,000 per month to all unemployment applicants whose claims are not fully processed within 30 days, funding for more call center staff and training for new staff, funding for multilingual services so that all Virginians can get help regardless of what language they speak, and funding to modernize and improve the VEC. Some of these recommendations were included in the special session budget, specifically: nearly \$74 million for initiatives to improve claimant services, which include IT modernization, call center staff, adjudication officers, and security personnel.

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### Broadband & Utilities

The General Assembly voted to end all COVID-19-related utility protections that were put in place in 2020 at the start of the pandemic. All utility shut offs may now resume August 30, 2021. There is also no requirement for utilities to offer longer-term payment plans.

In good news, the General Assembly established a new moratorium on utility shut offs of Dominion Energy customers who were qualified and received certain types of assistance – like SNAP, TANF, WIC, utility assistance, or medical power designation – during the last two and a half years. The special session budget also includes \$200 million in bill assistance for all water, sewer, gas, and electricity customers – excluding Dominion Energy customers – who were more than 60 days in arrears on their utility bill as of July 31, 2021. \$75 million was funded for remediation of septic and straight-pipe system upgrades for homes or properties, which, while not covering all necessary costs, will help lower income families in Virginia. Finally, we were pleased to see that the special session budget includes \$700 million to expand broadband infrastructure in the Commonwealth.

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### Language Access

We were pleased to see that funding for language access initiatives in the special session budget was far more than we expected. The Governor's Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion will receive \$500,000 for language access translation planning consulting services. The Chief Diversity Officer will provide a report on their progress by November 1, 2021.

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