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Summer 2021 Newsletter

Edited by Jonathan Krall, August 2021

In August 2021, Grassroots Alexandria was asked to discuss our work with students at the Virginia Theological Seminary and with youth in the Democratic Youth Coalition. In this edition of our occasional newsletter, we share updates on the specific topics we were asked to discuss. Further below, we provide an update on each of our teams.

Our work: coalition politics, by Jonathan Krall

The mission of Grassroots Alexandria is to teach political engagement to Alexandria residents and to use the tools of political engagement for social change. In my own prior work I learned from other activists. On our current organizational work, we learn from other organizations, such as Tenants and Workers United, an organization that represents the Latinx community and many other people of color. In both cases, the methods are similar. We build a coalition of individuals and groups to obtain a specific decision (our “ask”) from a specific decision maker. For each campaign, we decide on an “ask,” we build support around that specific topic, and we engage with decision makers, such as members of City Council. Between campaigns, we rest.

Part 1: Specific Issues

Housing: reducing eviction, by Jonathan Krall and Ed Kemp

We are currently supporting Tenants and Workers United to ask that American Rescue Plan (ARP, Covid relief) funds be used to ensure that no renter faces eviction in court without representation. According to the PEW Trusts[1], “To address the problem, some cities are trying a new tactic: provide tenants with free legal counsel in housing court. In eviction proceedings, the vast majority of landlords, 85 to 90 percent in some housing courts, show up to court with a lawyer, while tenants often face eviction without legal counsel.”

The ask: Use ARP funds to create a pilot program providing free legal representation for Alexandria residents facing eviction.

The coalition: TWU (lead organization), Grassroots Alexandria

The decision makers: Mayor, Vice Mayor, City Council, City manager

Progress: We have met with several decision makers, including the Mayor and the City Manager. One challenge is that many residents in the immigrant community are

grassroots alexandria

undocumented; some organizations are not legally able to represent undocumented residents.

[1] <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2017/10/27/how-free-legal-help-can-prevent-evictions>

Healthcare: supporting Medicare for All, by Jonathan Krall and Cedar Dvorin

We are working to pass a resolution in Alexandria in support of Medicare for All.

The ask: The current draft resolution[1] has language similar to an Affordable Care Act resolution[2] that Grassroots Alexandria championed in 2017.

The decision makers: Mayor, Vice Mayor, City Council

The coalition: Grassroots Alexandria (local lead), Northern Virginia Branch, Metro DC Democratic Socialists of America, OurRevolution Northern Virginia, TWU, and other groups[3]

Progress: We met with several decision makers and received positive responses. We have been asked to work with, and gain the support of, the Alexandria Public Health Advisory Commission.

[1] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1T0-JwWJXhYRW7nXLhgPzzIR_OCpt7FNiDqGZHi0BqX8/

[2] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2017/09/17/alexandria-city-council-takes-a-stand-on-healthcare/>

[3]

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdlpLLLc8wYNAPMcjhbz34V0mQtSzNPf1B_VRQAgh-bdh1HPQ/viewform

Education: getting police out of schools, by Jonathan Krall and Alli Holte

The Tenants and Workers United youth program led a successful effort to redirect/reinvest “school resource officer (SRO)” funding towards mental healthcare for students[1]. SROs are funded by City Council and guided by an agreement between Alexandria City Public Schools and the Alexandria Police Department. The school board had the power to end the agreement, but only City Council could re-direct the funding.

The ask: Redirect SROs funds towards youth-focused mental healthcare

The decision makers: School Board, Mayor, Vice Mayor, City Council

The coalition: TWU youth leaders (lead), TWU, Grassroots Alexandria, Racial Justice Alexandria

grassroots alexandria

Progress: Students and partners met with several school board members, participated in public hearings, and wrote to local newspapers[3]. In October 2020, the school board voted 6-3 to retain the SROs. Students and partners met with the Mayor, Vice Mayor and members of City Council. Racial Justice Alexandria and partners separately met with several of these decision makers. City Council voted to redirect funds in May[2], with a follow-up vote on mental healthcare funding in July[4].

[1] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2021/01/27/police-have-no-place-in-public-schools/>

[2] <http://www.connectionnewspapers.com/news/2020/oct/17/opinion-letter-editor-police-acpc-harms-students-e/>

[3] <https://www.alxnow.com/2021/05/14/alexandria-city-council-candidates-focus-on-health-care-police-and-race-relations-in-arlandria-forum/>

[4] <https://alextimes.com/2021/07/community-divided-on-councils-reallocation-of-sro-funding/>

Transportation Equity: addressing inequality and climate change, by Jonathan Krall and James Durham

To mitigate the climate emergency, we need rapid development of rapid transit[1]. As a matter of equity, transit corridors must connect housing to jobs with frequent all-day service[2]. As noted in past campaigns[3], transit needs to be accessible via robust biking and walking networks.

The ask: Develop the Duke Street transit corridor with maximum dedicated bus lanes, so buses don't get stuck in traffic

The decision makers: Transportation and Environmental Services Department, Mayor, Vice Mayor, City Council, Alexandria Transit Company (DASH)

The coalition: Livable Alexandria (lead), Grassroots Alexandria

Progress: DASH will implement a complete new bus network[4,5] with free fares, starting September 5, with high-frequency service on selected routes. We have been engaging the public to comment on the planned Duke Street improvements[6].

[1] <https://thehill.com/opinion/energy-environment/565278-investing-in-public-transit-is-a-climate-imperative>

[2] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2021/03/21/transit-equity-in-action-the-new-dash-bus-network/>

[3] <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/former-pa-congressman-and-presidential-candidate-joe-sestak-might-be-a-nimby/Content?oid=15282512>

[4] <http://www.dashbus.com/newnetwork>

[5] <http://www.dashbus.com/plantrip>

[6] <https://www.alexandriava.gov/DukeInMotion>

grassroots alexandria

Anti-Racist Study: we cannot address racism if we keep lying to ourselves about racism, by Jonathan Krall, Shira Eller and Cassidy Ketchem

Unlike our other campaigns, our Anti-Racist Reading Group[1] is not focused on a particular political decision maker. Instead, we educate Grassroots Alexandria leaders, supporters, and any member of the public who wishes to join in.

The ask: We ask participants to accept and to sit with the discomfort[2] of this difficult topic and to find meaningful ways to act against systems of oppression and bigotry in their own personal lives and communities. We ask participants to accept the reality of systemic racism, where an institution can produce racial harm (such as disproportional traffic stops[3]) without obvious individual racist acts, other than tolerating the racial harm. We ask participants to recognize that tolerance of this racial harm is widespread in our society.

Progress: We meet monthly and most recently studied the basics of Critical Race Theory. We are hoping to bring an expert on this topic into our monthly action meeting so as to reach more of our volunteers.

[1] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/events/>

[2] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2021/04/17/everyone-is-at-least-a-little-bit-racist/>

[3] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2021/01/24/how-police-culture-affects-alexandrians/>

Part 2: Team Reports

Vulnerable Communities Team, by Jonathan Krall and Zeina Azzam

In addition to the education and equity work described above, the Vulnerable Communities Team has partnered with TWU to host an outdoor, socially distanced City Council candidate forum[1], advocated successfully for a strong police community review board[2], met with the Alexandria police chief to press for police data transparency and create awareness about systemic racism in the city, spoken up (and marched) in support of the Movement for Black Lives[3], renewed our call for transparency in policing[4], protested the horrendous treatment of asylum seekers at our southern border[5], and worked with the City Council to recognize Indigenous Peoples Day in Alexandria[6]. We continue to seek effective implementation of restorative practices in our schools[7] and a reduction in suspensions of Black and Brown students.

[1] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2021/05/24/city-council-candidate-forum/>

[2] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2020/07/19/who-watches-the-police/>

[3] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2020/06/18/its-not-that-bad-its-worse-a-statement-of-support-for-black-lives-matter/>

[4] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2020/06/12/transparency-in-policing-a-good-first-step>

grassroots alexandria

[5] https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/chad-wolf-protest/2020/07/26/ba388f0c-cf6a-11ea-9038-af089b63ac21_story.html

[6] https://www.alexandriava.gov/news_display.aspx?id=111262

[7] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2020/02/05/statement-on-restorative-practices/>

Housing Team, by Jonathan Krall and Ed Kemp

In addition to the eviction-prevention work described above, Grassroots Alexandria Housing Team has advocated for affordable housing, especially in new developments[1], joined the City of Alexandria Partnership to Prevent and End Homelessness (though we prefer the term “houselessness”)[2], advocated for eviction moratoriums[3], and advocated for an increase in the Virginia Housing Trust Fund[4]. We continue to support expanded affordable housing, especially at the 40% AMI (area median income) level.

[1] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2021/06/23/inova-must-address-housing-and-health-needs-in-alexandria/>

[2] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2021/06/03/grassroots-alexandria-joins-the-partnership-to-prevent-and-end-homelessness/>

[3] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2020/06/26/tell-governor-northam-to-extend-the-eviction-moratorium-and-provide-real-lasting-rent-relief/>

[4] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2019/02/07/public-statement-on-va-housing-trust-fund/>

Communications Team, by Jonathan Krall

In addition to the Anti-Racist Reading Group discussed above, the Grassroots Alexandria Communications Team has kept our web page up to date, noting especially our appearances in the media[1]. We’ve passed information along to our email lists, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. We’ve supported other organizations and actions, such as the anti-fascism protests that followed the November 2020 election[2]. We have also recently produced one of our rare newsletters (you are reading it now).

[1] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/press/>

[2] <https://grassrootsalexandria.org/2021/01/02/the-fascists-havent-gone-away-we-cannot-rest/>