

# Public Policy Issue Priorities

**2024 EDITION**



WEST VIRGINIA  
COUNCIL of CHURCHES



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# 2024 Public Policy Issue Priorities

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# Introduction

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## Our Current Crisis

The West Virginia Council of Churches laments the deterioration of political debate in our society as it is expressed through the demonization of political adversaries, falsehood masquerading as truth for political gain, and the corrosive effect of anonymous money. All of these have a negative influence on public trust and the participation of citizens in the political process.

We call for civility, mutual respect, financial transparency, disclosure, and truth telling in campaigning and other forms of political activity.

Given the uncertainty over West Virginia's economic future, we strongly support the call for open civil discussions statewide regarding such issues as the future of the coal and gas industries, climate change, and economic diversity and sustainability. Such rational deliberations should respect the range of perspectives and promote the search for a future that embraces the integrity of God's creation and the prosperity of our communities.

Finally, we call for a different way of engaging the political sphere.

## Another Way

The freedom to govern ourselves is a gift from God. In recent years, we have managed to permit this remarkable good to divide us from our friends, our neighbors, and even our families. We have let ourselves believe that there are only two possible paths, only us and them, only winners and losers. We have let ourselves be divided into artificial tribes and we have been convinced that we must 'fight' to advance the position of our side at any cost. We have permitted our words to be co-opted and turned into weapons and we have endorsed, or stood by, while we attack one another without mercy over every statement, position, or idea. We act, and react, without thought for the harm that we cause.

This is not the way. There is another. Jesus Christ said:

**“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”**

*Matthew 5:43 (NRSV)*

**“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”**

*Matthew 5:44–45 (NRSV)*

**“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”**

*Matthew 5:46 (NRSV)*

**“And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”**

*Matthew 5:47 (NRSV)*

**“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”**

*Matthew 5:48 (NRSV)*

These commands are simple — and yet radical; they are immensely personal — and yet the experience of them is universal; they are easy to recite — and yet incredibly challenging to embrace.

Each of us is bombarded daily with messaging and media that seeks to divide us, encourages us to ‘fight,’ preaches to us that compromise is surrender, and indoctrinates us into a cult that idolizes politics, political gain, and power over others. This is not the way. There is another.

With the publication of this booklet, the West Virginia Council of Churches pledges to seek the way of Christ. We ask you to join us in rejecting the language of division and war. Join us in rejecting the cult of political tribalism and instead seek the goodness that God has planted in human hearts. Join us in remembering that family is stronger than the sum of its individual members and that our communities and state are stronger together than when we are divided.

Let us renounce confrontation, acknowledge our own mistakes, and be the first to LOVE. LOVE not only our neighbors and those with whom we agree — but LOVE radically, as Christ commanded. LOVE those with whom we disagree and seek to recognize them in ourselves.

## The 2024 West Virginia Council of Churches Public Policy Issue Priorities Booklet

A devotion to the Common Good prompts the West Virginia Council of Churches to present this *Public Policy Issue Priorities* booklet. Motivated by Christ's command to "love one another," the member bodies of the West Virginia Council of Churches go through an annual process of first listening to the community and then re-examining and editing a list of its public policy priorities in light of current developments in our state and beyond. As St. James pointed out, a faith that does not give rise to deeds is worthless (*James 2:17*). A true follower of Christ in the Mountain State will proclaim the Gospel of Life in loving action as an individual and as a citizen of the republic.

Statements contained in this publication were developed by the Council's Government Concerns/Peace and Justice Program Unit and accepted by the Council's Board of Directors in January 2024. Not all member bodies of the Council engage in and/or endorse statements by the Council, but all member bodies of the Council have a unit veto regarding the Council's public policy statements in order that the conscience of each may be preserved.

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# Imago Dei

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**“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image.’”**

*Genesis 1:26 (NRSV)*

**“Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”**

*1 John 4:20–21 (NRSV)*

Fundamental to our understanding of how we treat one another is our belief that all people are created in the Image of God, the Imago Dei, and are therefore due respect, care, and nurture. As reported by his daughter, Dr. Susannah Heschel, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel notes that there is no image of God other than what we have in another human being.\*

In terms of public policy, from a Biblical standpoint, special attention is then required for the most vulnerable in our society, such as the widowed, the orphaned, and the stranger (*see Deuteronomy 10:17–18*), the hungry, the prisoner, the sick, the poor (*see Matthew 25:31–46*), and others who may be defenseless.

Therefore the West Virginia Council of Churches takes the following public policy positions:

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\* *Thunder in the Soul: To be Known by God*, Abraham Joshua Heschel, edited by Robert Erlewine, p. xxv.



## Dismantling Racism

Two basic tenets of the Christian faith are that all human beings are created in the Image of God and that we are called to love God and to love one another. We find these principles to be violated by the sin of racism and assaulted by the ideology of white supremacy. Too many of our institutions still harbor, and too many of our laws still sanction, practices that deny justice and equal access to certain groups of people. We stand with those who peacefully oppose racism and acknowledge it as an affront to human dignity.

We continue to encourage state and federal officials to address racial disparities in the areas of civil rights; health, including health disparities related to COVID-19; education; housing; the environment; social issues; employment; economic development; and criminal and juvenile justice systems wherever they occur in the United States. We urge all persons who read our Public Policies booklet to remember how racism affects each issue, particularly the negative impact on children and young people. We support legislation to create a Minority Health Advisory Team to advise the Commissioner of Public Health on addressing health disparities and an Economic Justice and Equity Fund to improve public health and to help mitigate poverty related disparities.

We support personal and community engagement and reflection regarding racism, slavery, and inequity found throughout our country's history and we reject those things that minimize or neglect the deep hurt, violence, and continuing legacy of racism. Understanding the damage done by centuries of racism can lead us in new directions to heal the injury to our hearts, to our relationships, and to our communities, the ripple effects of which have caused pain and suffering to our sisters and brothers.

There can be no doubt that now is the time for our nation to commit, once and for all, to end racial injustice, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to become a nation worthy of being called "A city built on a hill" (*Matthew 5:14, NRSV*).

## Criminal Justice Reform

The West Virginia Council of Churches endorses efforts to reduce the state's dangerously overcrowded jail and prison populations, ease reentry for formerly incarcerated people, and support community-based corrections and restorative practices that address harm and promote accountability.



To ensure the safety of both staff and those who are incarcerated, the Council supports the enactment and implementation of a plan that would address required maintenance in West Virginia's prisons and regional jails. We also support incremental pay and performance awards for correctional staff, which will help alleviate vacancies in staff positions and aid in the retention of staff.

We believe that investing in programs that promote education, recovery from addiction, and economic security offers a more effective approach to public safety. We support access to adequate and appropriate health care, as well as a continuum of mental and behavioral health services.

We recognize the progress made by the West Virginia Legislature on criminal justice reform, but support continued action toward reforming the cash bail system (such as a no-cash bail system and other alternative sanctions), particularly as cash bail unjustly impacts the poor; revisiting excessive sentences; tightening guidance to eliminate arbitrary denial of parole to those who meet eligibility criteria; expanding access to educational and rehabilitation programs needed for release; and investing in supports for people leaving the system, such as transitional housing and developing a well-executed plan for insuring all people, including justice impacted people, obtain state issued identification cards in an expeditious manner.

We support making it easier for people to clear arrest and conviction records if they remain crime free for a period of time or were not convicted after arrest. We believe that the restoration of voting rights helps formerly incarcerated persons reintegrate back into society.

We firmly oppose efforts to reintroduce the death penalty.

It is also imperative to break the pipeline to prison that devastates young people in disadvantaged communities. We support efforts to make the juvenile justice system in West Virginia more effective in improving the life outcomes for children and youth and reducing crime and recidivism rates. Disproportionate school suspensions of low-income children (many thousands per year) are a major contributor to the under education of low-income communities and is therefore exacerbating poverty in these communities. Suspensions should be limited to cases in which students engage in violent activity towards fellow students or staff.

The majority of juveniles in West Virginia who are referred to the court system have committed low-level misdemeanors or underage offenses, and many of them have no prior history in the juvenile justice system. We can improve the outcomes for these children and youth and the outcome for our state by limiting unnecessary placements, reducing the system's racial and ethnic disparities, creating community-based alternatives to placement, supporting truancy diversion programs, phasing out school-based resource officers, and better engaging families.

We deplore the shackling of juveniles except as a last resort and oppose their trial as adults.

## Support of Community Policing and Reform

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports efforts that bring the police and the community together. We support the implementation of community policing policies, greater transparency in police misconduct investigations, and the building of positive relationships with children and youth,

knowing that over-policing in public schools can supersede normal school discipline and increase the pipeline to prison. Rather than relying solely upon police to respond to countless social issues, we encourage experimentation with alternative approaches to dealing with issues such as mental health, homelessness and substance use disorder.

## Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Immigrants

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports welcoming refugees, those seeking asylum, and immigrants no matter their origin, to the United States.

We remember when, as a child, our Lord Jesus Christ was a refugee and fled to Egypt (*Matthew 2: 13–22*). We recall Jesus' words in *Matthew 25: 31–46* rebuking those who gave no welcome to strangers. We believe with the author of *1 John 4: 20* that “those whom do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” Rooted in Genesis, we believe that the recognition of humans as being made in the Image of God calls us to respect all human beings. We welcome all as we welcome Christ, especially those who are vulnerable and in need.

Refugees and those seeking asylum welcomed to the United States are our guests and strangers in our midst. The West Virginia Council of Churches encourages all governments, private institutions, and people generally to treat refugees and those seeking asylum with dignity and respect. We encourage governments to remove legal obstacles that would stand in the way of refugees and those seeking asylum becoming productive, integrated, and contributing members of our communities. We encourage private institutions and all West Virginians to extend refugees and those seeking asylum the courtesy, charity, and mutual support that Mountaineers show to one another.

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports comprehensive reform of the U.S. immigration system toward a legal framework

that affirms the rights, worth, dignity and inherent value of immigrants. The Council supports an increase in the number of visas for short term workers and urges the adoption of policies that will help provide safe working environments for migrants and legal protections for them while they are in our country. The Council supports a realistic pathway to legal status for undocumented migrants who desire to remain in the United States.

We strongly condemn any policies that would separate children from their parents as a means of discouraging immigration and urge the swift reuniting of families separated by migration or detainment. We support the elimination of privately operated immigration detention centers, the elimination of indefinite detention, the preservation of due process, and access to adequate legal representation. We oppose the incarceration of children.

Christ taught that we should welcome the stranger among us and the West Virginia Council of Churches is committed to that principle. We can, and should make room for and welcome historically higher levels of refugee admissions and asylum seekers in their hour of need. We should also welcome immigrants in accordance with a fair and nondiscriminatory legal process.

## Care for Victims of Sexual Violence and Harassment

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports a standard of care bill for victims of sexual assault that includes identified plans for services for each county and addresses training needs of those professionals conducting forensic exams in order to ensure that sexual assault victims can go to any hospital in the state and have the necessary forensic exam conducted in an expeditious manner by trained staff.

The West Virginia Council of Churches also supports congregations, communities, workplaces, and recreational spaces that are free from sexual harassment.

## Remove Marriage Exemption from Sexual Abuse Code

Sexual violence can happen in many forms and West Virginia code identifies many of them as crimes. But not everyone is protected. Marital partners cannot be charged with some sexual abuse offenses due to a marital exception in West Virginia code. The Council of Churches supports efforts to remove this exception from West Virginia law.

## Civil Liberties

People of whatever sexual orientation must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.

## Protecting the Dignity and Civil rights for All Persons

The West Virginia Council of Churches advocates for the dignity and human rights of all persons and speak out against expressions of hatred or acts of violence directed against people because of their race, nationality, culture, ethnic group, religion, political position, gender, or sexual orientation. Houses of Worship and other religiously affiliated community spaces should be protected.

## Homelessness

We recognize those who are homeless as persons created in the Image of God in need of help. We reject attempts to stereotype the homeless, understanding that there many causes of homelessness including domestic violence, PTSD, economic, as well as behavioral health issues, such as substance use disorder. We support a broad strategy to prevent and address homelessness in our nation. We support legislation that helps communities define and respond to homelessness in rural, urban, and suburban areas. We support agency flexibility in allowing communities to respond appropriately to the housing needs of children, youth, families, and veterans. We believe that the practice of the Christian faith calls us to minister to the homeless and others in economic distress through a wide variety of ministries including feeding, clothing, and housing programs.

## Religious and Ethnic Minorities

We support the rights, safety, and protection of religious and ethnic minorities, especially in conflict zones.

## Rejection of Antisemitism and Islamophobia

The West Virginia Council of Churches rejects antisemitism, Islamophobia, and all bigotry against faiths and ethnicities as contrary to the love of God in Jesus Christ and as an affront to all people of faith and good will.

## Campaign Against Torture

We support policies that prohibit torture and other abusive and degrading treatment that violate human dignity. Torture degrades everyone involved — perpetrators, policymakers, and victims. Policies that permit torture and inhumane treatment are morally intolerable.

## Support for Military Families

We extend our thanks and appreciation to our military members and their families for their service in behalf of our nation. We continue to have great concern for the just treatment of the men and women who served and for all those impacted by these conflicts at home and abroad. We encourage both Congress and the West Virginia State Legislature to provide adequate funding for the support of returning soldiers and their families, especially our rural veterans, including treatment for combat post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and addictive disorders.



## War and the Use of Drones

We began this section of the Public Policy Issue Priorities booklet with the recognition that all people are created in the Image of God (*Genesis 1: 26*). Therefore, we are opposed to all wars of aggression and to preemptive strikes against other nations as these are not in keeping with Christian teachings. Recalling Jesus' saying that "blessed are the peacemakers," we call upon our leaders to redouble efforts to resolve international conflicts through diplomacy and nonviolent means. We urge Congress to create laws that ensure that civilians are protected in a time of war and that all actions regarding the use of drones are transparent, and require that humans are involved in the process of deploying and employing drones.





## Hope for Children

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**“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?”**

*Isaiah 49:15 (NRSV)*

**“Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.”**

*Matthew 18:10 (NRSV)*

**“but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”**

*Matthew 19:14 (NRSV)*

Children occupy a special place both in the life of the Church and in Scripture. Each and every child in the Mountain State deserves safety, care, and love. Children are mentioned in lists of vulnerable persons who need special care and attention, e.g. *Exodus 22:22*, and as an example of faith (*Matthew 18:3*). Therefore, we encourage generous public and private support for pregnant mothers, during and after pregnancy, to ensure that children are born into a healthy, safe, and secure environment with the resources necessary to flourish.

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports the goal of reducing childhood poverty in West Virginia and the many efforts and coalitions aimed at reducing child poverty. Even during periods where government budgets are tight or spending cuts are necessary, the programs that protect children and provide a safety net for those that may fall through the cracks are vital and should be preserved at the expense of other spending.

The following areas merit special attention:

## **Infant and Maternal Morbidity and Mortality**

Infant health and mortality is a matter that requires immediate attention in the Mountain State. Infant mortality in West Virginia is significantly higher than the national average and has actually worsened over the last decade; outcomes are even worse for Black West Virginians. The Council of Churches supports work to study data collected by the State's infant mortality review panel, the Office of Maternal, Child, and Family Health, and other institutions to identify causes and to formulate potential policy solutions to address infant and maternal mortality, especially as it relates to at-risk populations. We applaud recent efforts to acknowledge the importance of pre-natal and maternal care, especially in the expansion of CHIP coverage for pregnant women and in the extension of postpartum coverage through Medicaid waiver for a full year after childbirth.

## **Prevention**

Expansion of In-Home Family Education Programs (early childhood home visiting programs) can be a boon to ensuring robust development in children. These evidence-based programs partner with families so that children grow up healthy, strong, and ready to learn.

## Child Marriage

Data shows that children who enter into marriage before the age of adulthood face an increased risk of domestic violence as well as worsened health, economic and educational outcomes. Additionally, they do not have full rights and abilities to engage activities, such as securing housing and self-sustaining work. We believe in the protection of West Virginia children by making 18 the legal age of consent to marry without exception.

## Child Care

The first years of life are the most important in the intellectual, emotional, and social development of children. Child care workers should be compensated in accordance with this responsibility and calling. We endorse pre-kindergarten, In-Home Family Education, and the expansion of community-based programs that prevent child abuse and improve the quality of childcare and parenting. We support adequate funding for programs to improve the quality of child care currently available to working families. We support a state plan for, and increased investment in, programs for the prevention of child abuse and child sexual abuse prevention training.

## Education

Education is key to the future of West Virginia's children and their current well-being. We believe parents are a child's first teachers and have primary responsibility for the education of their children and we support initiatives



to involve and support parents in facilitating the education of their children. We encourage parents to be involved with, and supportive of, their children's education and support policies that embrace parent involvement.

We support adequate funding to make community and technical colleges, and our state funded four-year colleges and universities, a high quality and affordable option for West Virginia students seeking advanced education.

## Children's Health Coverage

We congratulate the Legislature and state officials for the excellent progress West Virginia has made in providing health coverage through Medicaid and CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program) to more than 200,000 children living in families earning at or below 300 percent of the federal poverty level. We further thank the Legislature for enacting provisions in CHIPRA that enhance eligibility and enrollment in CHIP and Medicaid.



We urge our Legislature and policy makers to continue this progress by:

- Supporting Medicaid and CHIP with funding for the State match;
- Supporting the creation of a CHIP buy-in as an option for families who are outside income guidelines and experiencing increased or unaffordable premiums;
- Modernizing our school health system by coordinating and integrating school health with available community services and adequately funding school-based health clinics;
- Supporting efforts to make healthier food choices available in our schools and to promote physical activity and health lifestyle choices;
- Addressing the increased incidence of poor perinatal outcomes among minority groups;

- Considering a child care tax credit to offset the cost of child care;
- Supporting a strategic mental health plan for children that encourages more investment in community-based programs.

## Child Welfare

Investments in foster care help facilitate more adoptions, more normalcy, less out of state care and an overall reduction of the cost of care on a per child basis. We call for increased investment in building family based foster care especially by supporting existing foster parents through peer support and services.



We support child-centered custody laws that consider each family's unique circumstances when determining child custody arrangements and that place the best interest of the child first.

All victims of family violence should have a safe environment, counsel, and support befitting our covenant with the human community. We support strengthening the protective order process by lengthening the time period for such orders, and by increasing penalties for violations.

Children and families deserve the best educated and trained DHHR case workers available.

The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (WV DHHR) should strive to recruit, hire and retain the best-educated and most qualified social workers, particularly degreed social workers for all positions in child and adult protection, youth services, foster care and adoption, family preservation, and case management. The Legislature can promote hire quality training and the retention of qualified staff by DHHR. To improve recruitment and retention

we also support adequate staffing, sufficient funding, adherence to caseload standards, worker safety initiatives, and important self-care opportunities to reduce secondary trauma and burnout.

In response to the increasing numbers of grandparents raising grandchildren, the West Virginia Council of Churches supports ensuring that the newly created Foster Care Ombudsman is fully funded and includes service to support kinship families who are not in the child welfare system.

These grandparents face many challenges including understanding the court system, custody issues, navigating the school system, financial issues, family relationships, the emotional and physical well-being of the children, and a complete change in lifestyle. The Foster Care Ombudsman can assist these kinship families by providing information about services and resources, as well as advocacy.

The Council also supports the work of organizations like Relatives of Parents Program (RAPP), who support grandparents and other relatives raising children, the Healthy Grandparents program, and the West Virginia Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Parents Network. The Council supports using settlements from opioid lawsuits to support West Virginia foster care, grand families, and kinship families.

The West Virginia Council of Churches also believes that post-adoptive support is important. Foster and kinship families who adopt children have access to fewer services and supports than those currently fostering. The effects of trauma experienced by children prior to adoption remain and can impact the family indefinitely. The West Virginia Council of Churches supports an increase in investment in services and support for families after adoption. These services should be easily accessible for families without fear of losing children back into the child welfare system.

## Protection of Safety Net for Children and Families

Data confirms that a robust and accessible safety net is critical not only for the health and well-being of families generally, but as a buffer to keep families from getting involved in the child welfare system on the front end. With the nation's highest rate of removing children from their biological families, we call on the governor and lawmakers to reject proposals that would fail to sustain current funding levels or reduce eligibility for unemployment benefits, federal food assistance (SNAP and WIC), cash assistance (TANF) and Medicaid. The ability to access these programs seamlessly and without undue barriers is critical to support for children and families and for addressing the state's foster care crisis in both the short and long term. Because the adoption of children is of long-term benefit to them, we urge the state to undertake soon a study of adoption procedures and costs in West Virginia to see if the former may be simplified and the costs reduced, including by state subsidies or tax credits.

## Sustainability of Children's Programing Resources

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports preserving funding for programs that serve children and families including quality, affordable child care, Family Resource Networks (FRNs), Family Resource Centers (FRCs), and child advocacy centers (CACs).

# The Common Good

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**“If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”**

*James 2:15–16 (NRSV)*

As people of faith, we have long recognized that attention to the Common Good requires a reciprocal contract between people and society. People are social beings, not meant for uncaring isolation, but for loving relationship with each other and God. We must speak urgently about the Common Good because the pressing challenges of the day require real community if we are to find solutions. We are meant to be in right relationship, in community, and in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the human family. Jesus himself said it best, “Love one another as I have loved you.” (*John 13:34*) This is the essence of striving for the Common Good.

## Gambling

While the legality and general acceptance of gambling in West Virginia has changed in recent years, the West Virginia Council of Churches continues to oppose the expansion of gambling, both legal and illegal. Gambling is addictive, takes money away from the mainstream economy within the state, and often disproportionately impacts those of fewer means. We especially oppose any form of gambling that results in animal suffering and abuse.



We continue to support adequate and permanent financing for the Problem Gambling Help Network and the placement of this program under the auspices of the Bureau of Behavioral Health instead of the Lottery Commission.



## Consumer Issues

We support the enhancement of rural life and the elimination of the digital divide by the extension of high speed information delivery, such as broadband, and other digital technologies in West Virginia. In today's information age, reliable and affordable access to digital technologies is a key component in promoting access to economic and educational opportunities.

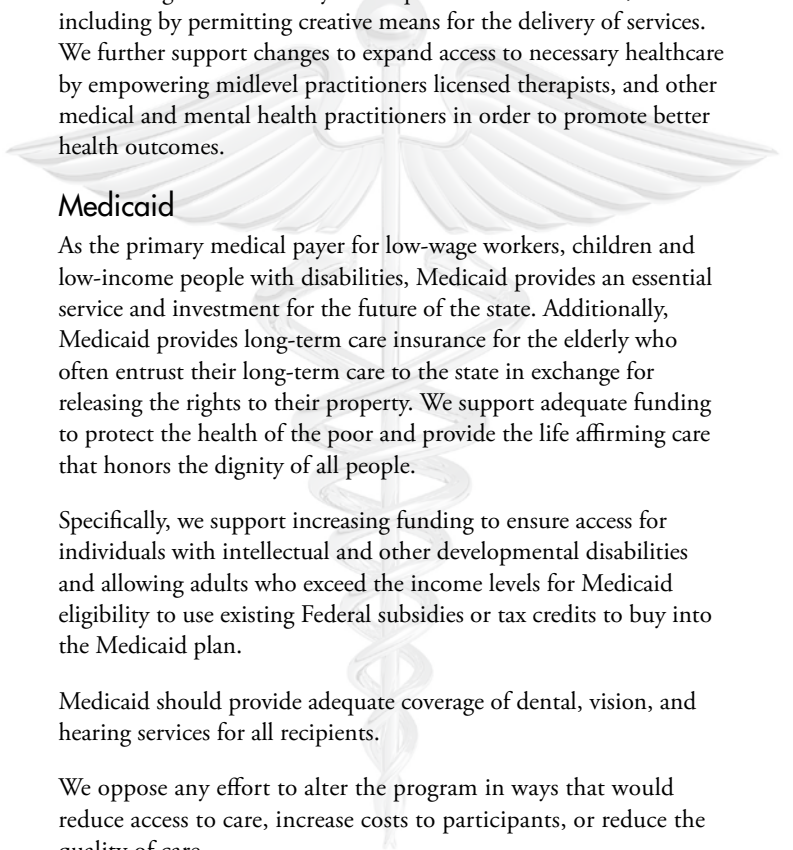
We support full public input and transparency on any major changes to public utilities that affect the citizens of West Virginia. We urge the Public Service Commission to use its authority to protect consumers in cases involving rate increases and to prioritize improvements in services over the profits of utility companies.

We support legislation that addresses the abuses of the credit industry. We support the creation of an independent insurance consumer advocate for the Insurance Commission, and a ban on the use of credit scoring to determine rates. We support full disclosure when insurance companies file for rate increases. We decry all forms of predatory lending and practices which are usurious in nature.

## Affordable Health Care

The importance of affordable health insurance to the future well-being of West Virginia cannot be overstated. Everyone — individuals, government, and employers — share responsibility in arriving at the goal of affordable health insurance for all.

West Virginia can also strengthen health care in our state by addressing the high cost of medications that are required to treat chronic illnesses and capping the cost of copays and other out of pocket charges; seeking to lower the costs for prescription drugs; passing legislation to end surprise medical bills; and continued protection for West Virginians from pre-existing condition exclusions.



The West Virginia Council of Churches encourages the Legislature to encourage the availability of adequate health care access, including by permitting creative means for the delivery of services. We further support changes to expand access to necessary healthcare by empowering midlevel practitioners licensed therapists, and other medical and mental health practitioners in order to promote better health outcomes.

## Medicaid

As the primary medical payer for low-wage workers, children and low-income people with disabilities, Medicaid provides an essential service and investment for the future of the state. Additionally, Medicaid provides long-term care insurance for the elderly who often entrust their long-term care to the state in exchange for releasing the rights to their property. We support adequate funding to protect the health of the poor and provide the life affirming care that honors the dignity of all people.

Specifically, we support increasing funding to ensure access for individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities and allowing adults who exceed the income levels for Medicaid eligibility to use existing Federal subsidies or tax credits to buy into the Medicaid plan.

Medicaid should provide adequate coverage of dental, vision, and hearing services for all recipients.

We oppose any effort to alter the program in ways that would reduce access to care, increase costs to participants, or reduce the quality of care.

## Keep Medicaid as an Entitlement

The West Virginia Council of Churches calls upon the U.S. Congress to maintain Medicaid as an entitlement program. Entitlement assures funding for those at risk.

## Medicare

We support the expansion of Medicare to cover dental, vision, and hearing services for all recipients. These services are integral to holistic health care and can prevent further complications that are more harmful to vulnerable adults and more expensive to treat. We also support allowing Medicare to negotiate for lower drug prices in order to provide for the expansion of services.

## Substance Use Disorder

The opioid epidemic is of great concern to the West Virginia Council of Churches and to the people of West Virginia. We support preventive policies and treatment programs that address the problem of Substance Use Disorder in our state, including treatment through outpatient counseling, inpatient treatment, and residential programs. We also recognize the need for those in correctional facilities to have access to treatment. Given that the rate of substance abuse is no greater among low-income families than higher income families, the experience of other states in implementing drug testing, and the diversion of funds that could be used for treatment, the Council opposes drug testing of persons receiving public assistance.

## Tobacco Use

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports efforts to reduce tobacco use in West Virginia. We support enforcing laws restricting secondary smoke in public places and oppose state legislation that would weaken public health, safety, and workplace reforms implemented by cities, towns, and counties by removing their authority in these matters.

## Long-Term Care of Seniors

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports efforts to change law and policy to protect elderly citizens in need of long-term nursing care. We also support adequate funding for important in-home care for seniors.



## Family Protection Act

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports laws and policies that enable individuals to carry out their responsibilities to their families including laws which prohibit discrimination in terms of hiring, discharge, compensation, employment opportunities, or questions regarding child-bearing or other family responsibilities.

## Eliminate poverty

The West Virginia Council of Churches believes poverty is inexcusable in our nation of plenty. We support and endorse economic, social, and public policies that promote opportunity for all West Virginians and that reduce poverty, and that help children and families build assets. We affirm that all persons are created in the Image of God and that the poor have no less rights than those who are wealthy. We oppose efforts by federal, state, and local governments that criminalize being poor and place barriers to the poor receiving benefits. We oppose spending reductions in key safety net programs, such as SNAP, and oppose policies that impose burdensome requirements on those who are receiving aid. We support the expansion of SNAP through cost-adjustments and increases to the eligibility limits. We support policies that make home ownership possible for low-income families.

## Food Security

- All people have a natural, inherent, and unalienable right to food and a fundamental right to be free from hunger, malnutrition,

starvation and the endangerment of life from the scarcity of or lack of access to nourishing food.

- We support an office of community food security.
- We support tax incentives for food producers to offset the cost associated with harvesting, storing, and transporting food donations.
- We support summer (and emergency) feeding programs organized around need identified by local school systems and with adequate funding to overcome access issues (including transportation).
- We call on our legislators to appropriate administrative funding from the state, and engage federal policymakers to increase the administrative allotment for emergency food program distributions so that our food banks can continue to expand food options for West Virginians facing hunger.
- We support the creation of a state fund to match EBT/SNAP spent at West Virginia Farmers Markets. This would create a state fund for the existing program, SNAP Stretch, in which SNAP dollars are doubled (or tripled with a child present) for produce at participating farmers markets, mobile markets, or local food shops.
- We support the state seeking a waiver to allow vulnerable populations to purchase hot foods with EBT/SNAP.
- We support tax exemptions, tax credits, and regulatory changes from the local to State level, combined with encouragement from public officials at every level of government, to encourage supermarket and grocery businesses to locate in West Virginia's many food deserts. The addition of grocery stores in these underserved areas will enhance access for low income and vulnerable populations to food, including to healthy options, and will reduce the expenses associated with acquiring the basic necessities of life.



## Support for Working People

We support workers' rights to organize a union and to engage in collective bargaining. We oppose intimidation, retaliation, forced meetings, and coercive actions or policies by employers, unions or governing bodies aimed at threatening or limiting the right to organize. We call upon the Legislature to help working people in our state by supporting a living wage for all workers including adequate pay and benefits for those who work with the most vulnerable: children and youth, the poor, the elderly, and people with disabilities; supporting legislation that creates Earned Sick Leave and Paid Family Medical Leave insurance programs so workers can afford to stay home when sick or to care for ill family members; and supporting the creation of a state system of universal voluntary accounts to enable working people to achieve retirement security.

Both business and government have a role to play in ensuring that working people participate in the Common Good. Protecting the health of workers and their families is a primary concern. The West Virginia Council of Churches is disappointed that years after the Upper Big Branch mine disaster, which killed 29 miners, both the West Virginia legislature and the United States Congress have

failed to pass meaningful mine safety legislation. Such legislation should include protection for whistleblowers, higher standards for ventilation, and tougher sanctions for corporations and executives who cut corners when it comes to protecting coal miners. We are also alarmed at the increase in Black Lung and other dust-related diseases and urge our state and federal legislators to legislate additional protection from these diseases and better access to benefits. We support legislative safeguards to ensure that funds designated for workers' health care and provided to contractors on state-funded projects are actually used for that purpose.

Protecting wages and benefits, including 26 weeks of unemployment benefits, is another area where the Legislature and businesses can work together to support those in the workforce. The Council supports allowing tax incentives only for companies that provide wages and benefits in line with the West Virginia Self-Sufficiency Standard, protect pensions, and preserve the environment; prevailing wage laws that provide wage protection for communities where public construction dollars are spent; enacting a tax system on both a Federal and State level that provides adequate funding for education, social services, infrastructure and recreation; and adopting a refundable state Earned Income Tax Credit and preserving the federal Earned Income Tax Credit.

The West Virginia Council of Churches calls upon Congress to adopt new corporate bankruptcy laws to provide protections to workers when corporate bankruptcies are filed. In West Virginia, steelworkers and miners have unjustly lost earned benefits in recent bankruptcies. Corporate bankruptcies not only place an undue hardship on workers and local communities but also place an unfair burden on the federal and state governments to utilize tax dollars to provide benefits that previously were the responsibility of corporations and their pension funds. This process breaks faith with employees who have served a company for many years and are counting on the promised pensions and benefits.

Billions in federal tax dollars are also lost from offshore tax haven abuse by corporations and millionaires. Congress should make sure everyone pays a fair share by closing these egregious loopholes in our tax system so our nation can make progress on its budgetary challenges.

## Funds for Winter Heating

We call upon the Governor's Office, Public Service Commission and Department of Health and Human Resources to closely monitor any increases in costs of providing heat for homes in the winter. We call for an oversight committee to ensure that laws are followed regarding any shut-offs of heat service and for the continuation and expansion of community efforts to provide energy assistance to help low-income and fixed-income persons with heating expenses.





# The Beloved Community

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**“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”**

*Romans 12:18 (NRSV)*

**“So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all . . .”**

*Galatians 6:10 (NRSV)*

People of faith have a calling to cooperate with God in building a beloved community that reflects God’s kingdom here on earth. Such community is characterized by justice, mercy, compassion, equality, and peace. We urge faith communities to undertake this work, striving for humanity to live in interdependence and mutuality in a society where the multitudes — people from every nation, tribes, and peoples and languages (Rev. 7:9) — live in harmony. The West Virginia Council of Churches calls for and supports public policies based on a common ethic of love that will “establish justice in the gate” of public life (Amos 5:15), so that all people have the opportunity to flourish and thrive as God intends.

## Defending the Democratic Process

Faced with many monumental decisions, it is imperative that our government decision makers be free from powerful and wealthy special interest contributors that increasingly dominate elections and legislative decisions.



Reform focuses upon public financing of elections, freeing our Legislature and Judiciary to be informed, to listen to their voter constituency, and to search their own conscience. Public financing helps restore citizen confidence in government decision making. We support measures which insure the independence of our state

judiciary system. We support accountability and transparency for campaign finances.

We support greater access to the ballot through the enactment of same-day registration, no-excuse absentee voting, and voting and other measures that enable ballot access without compromising the required verification of constitutional requirements for eligibility to vote.

We also support equal access to the judicial system by all persons regardless of financial means. We support an adequate and sustained source of funding for organizations, such as Legal Aid, that represent the poor.

Other reforms we support include requiring corporate CEOs to disclose corporate electioneering advertisements and the establishment of a voluntary system of public campaign financing for members of Congress.

## Protecting the Legislative Process

We believe the legislative process can be just as important to good government as the outcome. A process that provides for study, debate, vetting, and public input helps to ensure that enacted legislation will best address the problems faced by our great state. Circumventing this important process, by rushing or eliminating committee work, limiting the opportunity for public comment, or failing to hear from all sides on an issue, has a substantive detrimental impact on the quality of enacted legislation. Over time, such practices can discourage the public from participating in the process and erode confidence in institutions.

While our constitutionally limited legislative sessions can lead to chaotic and condensed work, especially toward the end of the legislative session, we urge reliance on the regular and predictable order of the legislative process wherever and whenever possible toward the goal of faithfully representing and carefully protecting the interests of the people of the great State of West Virginia.

## State Budget

The State needs to provide for adequate funding for essential services, such as Medicaid, especially to vulnerable populations, particularly with regards to children, youth, and



seniors. We support an increase in the alcohol and soft drink tax, and raising the excise tax on cigarettes, as well as on smokeless tobacco, to support and improve health care and cessation programs. We support greater accountability in state budgeting, specifically through the creation of an independent state Legislative Fiscal Office.

## Federal Budget

We oppose cutting Medicaid, Medicare, and other anti-poverty programs as a means to balance the federal budget or fund the federal debt. We do support increases in SNAP, Medicaid, child care, and other social programs that help vulnerable populations. We support the reauthorization and funding of the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and the continuation of the expanded Child Tax Credit.

## Support for Communities in Transition and in Other Distress

Coalfield communities have long provided the state and nation with energy, but often have not reaped the benefits. The West Virginia Council of Churches supports efforts to economically diversify coalfield communities and based on processes that provide for public input as to the economic future. We also support state and federal transitional assistance to the coalfields through additional funding for job training, economic development, infrastructure and the reclamation of lands damaged by mining, including establishing and funding a state Commissioner and/or Just Transition office

to oversee and facilitate the rebuilding of communities affected by the changing energy markets and priorities. We encourage American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds be invested strategically in economically distressed communities.

With the advent of new opportunities afforded by federal legislation, we support community benefit agreements that are equitable, inclusive of diverse and vulnerable populations, include community participation and involvement, and are transparent.

While there may be disagreement here about the extent to which the decline in coal jobs is due to market conditions or regulations, we urge all stakeholders to support and take maximum advantage of opportunities to assist these areas.

We support legislation to promote a just transition for coalfield communities and those impacted by natural resource extraction in order to promote greater sustainability and prosperity.

Along these lines, we believe landholding companies bear a portion of the responsibility in helping rebuild our transitioning communities and are uniquely positioned to do so by working to find pathways to make land available to local individuals, groups, businesses, and organizations for economic development. Therefore, we support collaborative efforts and partnerships between landholding companies and community stakeholders which lead to the creation of new opportunities to harness the power of the land to create sustainable, thriving communities.

We encourage state leaders to maximize the impact of available federal funding to support redevelopment of distressed communities in West Virginia. We support the use of appropriate financial incentives and of available federal and state funds to attract industries and businesses to areas of the state that were once major steel-producing towns and cities.



## Protect Rural Way of Life

We advocate for the right of people to possess property and to earn a living by tilling the soil. We call upon our government to revise support programs that disproportionately benefit wealthier agricultural producers, so that more support can be given to programs that benefit medium and smaller sized farming operations. These include programs that build rural processing, storage, distribution, and other agricultural infrastructure; which link local farmers to local schools and other markets; and which promote food security in local communities.

We support green business acceleration including enhancing local food systems such as in schools and hospitals, investing in green jobs, moving away from industrial recruitment, and encouraging local enterprise. Farmer's markets should not be hindered by conflicting and overlapping state and federal regulations which prevent food growers from selling directly to the public. Cooperative business entities should be permitted beyond the agricultural sector.

We support policies that allow people to safely create foods in their homes and sell them at fairs, festivals, and other retail outlets.

Connecting rural America with improved transportation systems is a major challenge for the nation as a whole. With the federal transportation reauthorization bill pending, the nation has an opportunity to modernize, strengthen, and integrate the transportation systems that connect rural people and places to each other and urban commercial centers, while protecting the landscapes, habitat, and livelihoods of rural communities. Strategic investments in rural transportation, including broadband technology, will support the nation's recovery and long-term growth at a historic time. These investments are critical for getting people to job and training opportunities, commercial centers, schools, and vital services. Innovative thinking, adequate and flexible resources, and long-term strategies to identify and implement appropriate solutions will be required.

## Support for Broadband

The West Virginia Council of Churches is greatly encouraged by the new Federal funds coming into West Virginia that will extend the reach of broadband in our state. We urge the West Virginia Legislature ensure that these funds are spent wisely on building a robust infrastructure and that high road labor standards are such that skilled and trained West Virginians provide the foundation for the workforce engaged in this endeavor.

We also support the Affordable Connectivity Program, which helps make the Internet economically feasible for low-income families.

## Disaster Response/FEMA

The West Virginia Council of Churches calls upon Congress to address the accessibility and cost of flood insurance, including the accuracy of policy rating, thus making the purchase of flood insurance more affordable to those in high-risk areas. To address accessibility, we encourage Congress to require insurance agents to offer flood insurance coverage whenever a homeowner's policy is

offered or renewed. After every disaster, we encounter flood victims who have been informed by their insurance agents that flood insurance was not available. To address affordability, we encourage Congress to investigate the administrative costs of the Write Your Own program. Modern technology should allow flood insurance policies to be administered more economically thus reducing the cost of flood insurance. To address accuracy, we encourage Congress to:

- (1) investigate the feasibility of subjecting a percentage of each agent's policies to review, with penalties for agents who consistently mis-rate policies; and
- (2) closely monitor the impact the changes in the FEMA Emergency Support Functions, especially ESF # 6 (Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing & Human Services) has on disaster victims.

Because of the number of disasters in West Virginia over the past several years, the West Virginia Council of Churches also supports state funding for case management and individual assistance.

## Support for Federal and State Resiliency Efforts

Given the increase of severe weather events in our world, the West Virginia Council of Churches supports efforts on both a federal and state level to increase the resiliency in our nation. Such efforts include a national strategy that better streamlines federal support — especially where it addresses historical inequities, and equipping local leaders with the resources they need to plan for the future.

We support strategies such as the deployment of renewable energy microgrid technology, thereby creating community resilience hubs, which increases community resilience during power disruptions, decreases CO2 emissions, will increase jobs in the new green economy, provide electricity for essential services (fire stations, emergency shelters, hospitals, community centers, etc.), and may save lives for those who depend on oxygen and other health systems for safety. We also urge that FEMA funding is used to prioritize

renewable energy, including the installation of microgrids nationally, when rebuilding after hurricanes, flooding or other natural disasters as the best building standard for today.

## Social Security

We support strengthening and protecting the Social Security system and

its funding. This has for decades been our most successful national safety net program, and should not be privatized. Funds could be increased both by raising the minimum wage and by lifting the cap on taxable income.



## Gun Safety

Spokespeople for all sorts of faith traditions insist on God's desire for peace and mutual respect among all humans. Over the past several years, images of massacres have filled our airwaves, including mass shootings at elementary schools, movie theaters, places of entertainment, and military bases. These tragedies sum up how far life in America can be from reconciliation, forgiveness, dialogue, and peace. The West Virginia Council of Churches supports research into the causes of gun violence and bipartisan dialogue that leads to effective remedies that will reduce gun violence in our country. We affirm the right of faith communities to determine firearms policy on their own property and further support the right of all schools, institutions of higher learning and businesses in West Virginia to determine firearm policies on their property and not be forced to allow guns on campuses. We support legislation on the federal and state levels to require background checks in connection with the purchase of all firearms. Because of the ability of high capacity automatic and semiautomatic weapons to inflict harm and death on many people in a single incident, the West Virginia Council of Churches urges both our state and federal legislatures to ban the sales of such weapons for the safety of our children and our communities.





## Creation

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**“The earth is the LORD’s and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.”**

*(Psalm 24:1, KJV)*

The West Virginia Council of Churches believes we are called by God to be caretakers of the natural beauty, land, abundant water resources, and air quality that surrounds us in West Virginia every day. As stewards of creation, we have a calling to keep and care for all life. We encourage all faith communities to be involved with creation care, remembering that “the earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). Therefore, the West Virginia Council of Churches lifts up the critical importance of Creation Care as a priority for both our faith communities and our legislative decision makers.

## Protection of Biodiversity and Environmental Safeguards

We support policies that protect biodiversity and preserve endangered species, including the federal Endangered Species Act, recognizing that biodiversity benefits humankind and the ecosystems we all depend on. Rollbacks on environmental safeguards have given us great cause for concern.

## Children and the Environment

The West Virginia Council of Churches wishes to draw special attention to the relationship between children and the environment. Children are developmentally more at risk from environmental degradation than adults and will live to see the consequences of how we care for the environment today. Therefore, we affirm that protecting drinking water, streams, and rivers; establishing strong air quality standards; securing robust environmental protections; and, for the benefit of our children and those who will be born in the future, reducing greenhouse gases on the order of at least a 45% reduction by 2030 and net-zero emissions by 2050, are of highest priority for the West Virginia Council of Churches.

## Climate Change

In the midst of ongoing discussion about the human and natural causes of climate change, we affirm our calling to be good stewards of God's creation, responsibly using and preserving it. We are called to be co-creators with God and, as such, all human technology should be evaluated according to a risk/benefit/economic analysis that leads to protecting and preserving the earth and all living things. We support the continued development of our understanding of climate change and call for all people and organizations to cooperate and collaborate on efforts, grounded in the best of our scientific understanding, to address climate challenges together. We recognize that both human communities in particular and the environment in general are being devastated due

to climate change. The dangers of the changing climate manifest the urgent need for bold effective national climate policies to effect global emissions.

We also believe that a national solution to a global problem cannot fall solely on one region or unduly impact the poor. Therefore, we call upon Congress to find ways to mitigate the impact of climate change legislation upon the people of Appalachia and anyone affected by the transition.

We call upon state leaders to move from denial and obstruction to action on climate change, including ensuring the economic viability of West Virginia as we move towards lower emissions.

## Family Heritage and Sacred Spaces

We support legislation protecting the sacredness and integrity of all West Virginia family cemeteries and other sacred places from encroachment by mineral extraction, logging, and business or residential development. We support the enforcement of free and regular access to such cemeteries. We encourage the establishment of a 300 foot buffer zone for cemeteries to protect them from any industrial activities. In the case where damage to cemeteries has occurred, we support care and compensation for the victims and an effective response to the damage.

We recommend the establishment of a state-maintained database for the registration and location

of all cemeteries. We encourage the preservation of our state's important cultural and historic sites. We also encourage the State Legislature to declare the week before Memorial Day as "Cemetery Preservation Week."

## Public Health Impact Assessment

We urge the Legislature to require that a public health impact assessment be performed by the Department of Health prior to enacting any environmental rule change.

We recommend that the Legislature work with the West Virginia University School of Public Health to ensure the provision of independent studies that establish databases and monitor health effects related to shale gas drilling.

## Chemical Safety

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports legislative safeguards to protect the health and safety of West Virginia workers, families and its economy by reducing toxic exposure and preventing chemical disasters. In order to do this, it is essential that policies are instituted that require implementation of safer alternatives and a risk-based approach to chemical classification; phase out the most dangerous chemicals on the market today; recognize statewide chemical vulnerabilities and implement disaster prevention plans; ensure community right-to-know provisions; and include protection for vulnerable populations and the environment.

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports recycling efforts to reduce the use of aluminum, glass and plastic containers to help eliminate roadside waste and to create jobs. We encourage commerce, industry, and the public to find ways to reduce the uses of plastics, especially single use plastics.

## Air Quality

The West Virginia Council of Churches supports improved air quality for all West Virginians. We encourage the Legislature to adopt improved standards for electrical power plants, diesel vehicles, cars and trucks (including school buses), and fuel pumping stations.

We encourage the state government to downsize to smaller vehicles, hybrids, or electric whenever feasible. We encourage the Legislature

to enact tax incentives for the purchase of hybrid and electric vehicles and the building of charging stations and the installation of household energy systems using renewable energy.

We recognize the need for baseline carbon emissions data to help measure our progress.

We support the implementation of stronger provisions to protect human health under the Clean Air Act. Clean air regulation saves lives from cancer, lung and heart disease, and greatly reduces the number of child and adult hospitalizations from asthma, allergies, and emphysema.



## Water Issues

West Virginia has had some of the finest streams and groundwater resources in the world. We support policies that ensure water quality and quantity issues are thoroughly addressed, and that require that public input is sought at all stages. We encourage the Legislature and the Department of Environmental Protection to strengthen rules and restore protections that safeguard water quality and quantity. Narrative standards for mercury, selenium, and other toxic metals should not be compromised, as these elements pose many dangers to human health, and especially the health of our children. All lead

pipes in the state need to be replaced. We oppose the redefinition of “waste” and changes to the Buffer Zone Rule that are permitting hazardous materials to be dumped into our waterways.

Potable water is becoming an increasingly critical resource and everyone deserves clean drinking water. We encourage the state and its agencies to adopt and enforce the federal Clean Water Act standards. We support the highest level of protection possible for our finest streams. We urge the Legislature to support the funding of more water projects to provide clean, potable water to all families in West Virginia. We support policies that protect clean drinking water for all citizens, so that our water is safe, accessible, and affordable.

We call upon the state to encourage the maintenance of municipal and county ownership of public water utilities and to resist privatization of this essential resource.



## Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy

Energy Efficiency is a sensible investment for West Virginia. Saving energy through efficiency is a cost effective solution in the midst of rising energy costs, especially for at-risk families facing high energy bills. Energy efficiency related jobs are local and cannot

be outsourced. We support the establishment of utility-based Energy Efficiency programs and incentives that include an Energy Efficiency Resource Standard (EERS) and Integrated Resource Planning — essentially a Least Cost Planning process, to ensure the lowest electric rates possible for West Virginia. Local Energy and Efficiency Partnerships (LEEP) financing for small business is an important public/private policy change that would benefit our economy by creating a funding mechanism for local businesses to improve building efficiency through private capital.

Net metering enables households and businesses to generate their own electricity through solar, then feed their excess power back into the local electric grid. The West Virginia Council of Churches supports rules that continue to allow West Virginia consumers to be compensated for that surplus power at a full market rate.

We encourage our leaders to embrace the economic opportunity and job creation offered by the development and implementation of clean and renewable energy sources and energy efficient construction principles. We urge the Legislature to reenact a renewable energy portfolio standard for West Virginia, with emphasis on clean, truly renewable energy rather than unsustainable “alternatives.” We support the establishment of programs that include quantifiable targets for conservation and energy efficiency, including stronger efficiency programs offered by utilities. We support economic incentives for renewable energy development such as wind, solar, and geothermal.

We support the creation of a West Virginia Energy Enhancement Fund, a dedicated state funding mechanism to be used to expand capacity in both renewable energy and energy efficiency measures. Such funds in 20 other states have leveraged ten times the amount spent by the states in the form of investments from outside sources.

We support the ability for West Virginians to invest in and benefit from locally owned, renewable, and energy efficient energy

technology. We also believe that our state government and our utilities should act in the best interest of West Virginians in order for our citizens to reduce and manage their own energy bills.

While many West Virginians want to go solar, obstacles such as shaded roofs, lack of homeownership, and/or cost, can make a solar option difficult if not impossible. On the other hand, community solar makes it easier for anyone with an electricity bill to save with solar and gives people the freedom to choose where their energy comes from. Enabling Community Solar programs in West Virginia will control energy costs, spur market competition, create good local jobs and save ratepayers millions. Additionally, the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act created an unprecedented opportunity for solar development in West Virginia. Legalizing community solar can improve energy equity and extend the benefits of solar to all West Virginians.

## Microgrids

We support the rapid and strategic deployment of locally-based, renewable energy microgrids powered by wind or solar installations, with battery storage, as an off-the-shelf, practical, alternative to tap the potential of clean, renewable energy and increase community resilience and safety during emergencies and power outages. This distributed form of renewable energy also reduces greenhouse gases, increases energy efficiency, may decrease utility costs for consumers, and can strengthen national security and reinforce the traditional electric grid. An unprecedented amount of federal funding now exists to assist states in increasing renewable energy which can provide thousands of new jobs easing the economic transition for workers.

## Cessation of Mountaintop Removal

As people of faith, called upon by our covenant with God and each other to safeguard and care deeply for what God has created, we cannot stand by while our mountains are being devastated. The



destruction caused by mountain top removal mining, as presently practiced, is unprecedented and permanent. In addition, a number of studies have indicated there are adverse health impacts. We have, in the past, called for the strictest possible enforcement of SMCRA (Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977) and the Clean Water Act. However, in light of further health studies that have appeared pointing to negative effects of mountaintop removal, the West Virginia Council of Churches now calls for the cessation of mountaintop removal mining. (The full text of the Council's revised statement on this topic is available at <http://www.wvcc.org>)

We have viewed the level of tension, confrontation, threats and harbingers of violence in our coalfields around the issue of mountaintop removal mining. We call upon our elected officials to encourage through example, an attitude of understanding toward those with whom we disagree.

We call for citizen representation on the Surface Mine Board.

## Coal Slurry Injection and Impoundments

The West Virginia Council of Churches encourages the protection of communities adjacent to coal slurry impoundments. We support the moratorium on coal slurry injection and join others in calling for a ban on slurry injection and on expansion of existing impoundments and construction of new ones. Dry processing methods are available for the treatment of slurry. We also support regular inspections of existing sites.

## Shale Gas

We encourage the Legislature to fully fund the Division of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Oil & Gas Division and strengthen protections for both the land and the people whose property is under development.

West Virginia landowners owning only the surface of their property have long experienced impacts on their environment, health, and



way of life with little say about how the exploration for oil, gas, and other minerals affects their land. We encourage the Legislature to strengthen protection and ensure justice for landowners whose property is under development for oil and gas and to reverse the trend of split estates by allowing surface owners the first option to purchase any interest in the minerals under their land when those minerals are sold for unpaid taxes.

We urge the Legislature to work to ensure that businesses extracting, processing, and delivering the Marcellus and other shale gas and building related facilities to employ qualified and skilled workers from the community to fill jobs in drilling, construction and maintenance; be responsible stewards to the air, land, and water where natural gas is extracted, processed, and delivered with special attention to water cycles and disposal of waste products; reduce methane emissions; and maintain open lines of communication with stakeholders in order to ensure the safety and security of communities in which the industry is operating or developing operations. We also support measures to inventory and cap orphan and abandoned wells.

All gas pipelines and underground storage hubs should be evaluated for their environmental, health, and social impact and whether present or future demand truly warrants their construction. We encourage recognition that the coal-to-liquids process and Marcellus and other shale drilling use excessive amounts of our precious water.

We support legislation to implement the recommendations of the studies mandated by the Horizontal Well Control Act, such as measuring the setback distance between homes and horizontal drilling operations from the limit of disturbance and increasing the setback to 1,500 feet; fence-line monitoring for noise, dust, and other air emissions from horizontal drilling sites; measurable emission standards for the above parameters that can be adjusted using Best Available Control Technology to control emission and stay within the required limits; and short and long-term health studies of citizens living in communities with shale gas development.



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