

Organizational Profile

New Virginia Majority



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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2020, as states debated how and where to deploy high-priority relief funding for communities that had been impacted by COVID-19, members of **New Virginia Majority (NVM)** across the state were raising their most critical concern: housing support. The state legislature would soon hold a special session to discuss recovery funding, and NVM saw this as an opportunity to engage the power relationships they had built both with the Virginia governor’s office as well as state senate and house leadership. In particular, members were documenting significant data in their local meetings indicating that the initial wave of housing funds that had been disbursed earlier in the year was not necessarily reaching communities with the greatest need. Jon Liss, Co-Executive Director of NVM, describes what the organization was hearing: “All the people ... that we organized around the state were in acute pain within a couple months ... we were quickly getting, in real-time, word on the ground that the money isn’t getting through ... there are logjams around language, logjams around documentation status, [agency] people aren’t answering.”

Securing additional funding, as well as developing more effective processes to make sure funds would reach the communities that NVM represented, would require leveraging the influence the organization had built through relationships with policymakers. “Some of those people got elected because somebody [from NVM] in an orange shirt knocked on doors,” Liss explains. Legislative processes and policy decisions at the state capitol in Richmond are notoriously fast-paced and traditionally influenced by backroom deals between individuals with exclusive networks of relationships and power. As a result, it has been historically challenging to incorporate the voices of everyday people into decision-making — to ensure that the actual sausage-making of policy development is itself democratic. As an organization seeking to combat this norm by elevating local leaders’ voices, both in the state and local legislation they focus on as well as the process by which they influence those legislative decisions, NVM had to confront tensions around how to be the best advocate for their members. A set of choices arose on the housing funding; Should NVM push back on legislative partners on the implementation of bill A, therefore creating resistance with policymakers expecting support from NVM — and who might then withdraw their support on a future bill B? Or should NVM appease these partners in order to secure a win on another front? And within those individual decisions, how should

Key Question:
How does New Virginia Majority remain accountable to local leaders while also building power to influence local and state policymakers and legislative processes?

Theme



Internal
Accountability
and Decision-
Making

NVM's leadership center the interests and voices of members — while also holding the greater picture of the organization's overarching policy agenda?

Organizational Overview and History

NVM was founded in 2007 to build on three decades of local organizing in Alexandria, Fairfax County, via Tenants and Workers United. The organization seeks to build independent political power amongst working-class people of color through large-scale civic engagement, issue advocacy, strategic communications, and community organizing. NVM runs campaigns across several issue areas, including economic justice, criminal justice, environmental justice, housing, education, health, voting rights, and freedom from hate programs. The organization's governance structure relies both on local chapters as well as four local/regional "hubs" that connect to the organization across the state based on history, culture, race, nationality, etc. NVM's chapters serve as the backbone of the organization's structure and are where the majority of its members are located. The hubs are constituencies across the state that were doing autonomous organizing and have merged with NVM in a coalition structure in order to wield greater power in the state. These hubs include:

- **Tenants and Workers United (TWU):** Latinx and immigrant organizing in Northern Virginia
- **Virginia Student Power Network (VSPN):** Public university students organizing on 6+ campuses across the state
- **Virginia Black Organizing Collaborative (VA BLOC):** Black-led organizing in Newport News and Hampton Roads
- **Asian Pacific Islander Civic Engagement Collaborative (ACE Collaborative):** Organizing Asian groups and communities primarily in Northern Virginia

The relationship between the hubs and the chapters evolves with different aspects of NVM's work — for example, each of the hubs may work on legislative issues that are outside of NVM's core agenda, *and* they also take part in NVM's legislative priority-setting process. The organization has 55 full-time staff, and annual revenue in 2020 was \$4.5 million.

NVM's governance seeks to center "small-d" democracy and collective decision-making. Utilizing lessons learned from the work of Tenants and Workers United, the hubs each focus on building power with their own constituencies in terms of race, class, and geography. NVM provides an overarching space to consider campaign theory and vision and win statewide. Additionally, this statewide umbrella is designed to support long-term member accountability and influence, as well as bridge between its organizing and advocacy work. "It's not just about winning," Liss says. "There's a lot more that goes into it, not just winning. I think that's true, especially since, no matter how much we win, we still don't have what we need, just as a

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community. Our communities still don't have what they need. So we do have to continue to do the organizing on the political side as well as the deep organizing that everyone has been talking about." To enable this level of accountability, NVM has built an organizing program that invests in developing ongoing, year-round relationships with members.

NVM also prioritizes building multi-racial democracy, particularly given their distributed hub structure. Given the organization's roots in organizing historically white and Latinx working-class people across the state, leadership is now trying to identify ways to both recruit new members and build collective identity across socioeconomic status and geography while still centering racial justice. "Do we create a Southwest Virginia organizing project? Do we implant an organizer with the mine workers?" Liss asks. "In Northern Virginia, it's figuring out, what do the new economy green workers look like — what's their racial composition, gender composition?"

Accountability at the Local and State Level

NVM's decision to secure stronger relationships in Richmond in 2016 was a significant one. Recognizing that it was important to be directly connected to legislators, Tram Nguyen, NVM's Co-Executive Director, moved down to Richmond and established a physical presence there. This move acknowledged and attempted to address barriers that typically preclude ordinary people's participation in policymaking processes. "Some of my most important committee meetings happen at 6:30 in the morning, and so it's not conducive to your average citizen participating," Nguyen explains. Instead, the organization tried to establish a structure through which its leadership could serve as a conduit for member input to make its way directly to legislators. This kind of representation required balancing several different concerns. "Our community organizers are out there on the ground raising issues, sometimes in ways that make the establishment feel uncomfortable, but we do it anyway because we have to be true to our community," Nguyen says. "So there is always this balance that we play between the inside and outside strategy. There's a natural tension there, but I think at the end of the day, our values and how we approach work, we are always going back to the community and have those ties."

In building these representational relationships, NVM strives to make its policy work accountable to its grassroots organizing work, by identifying its policy agenda and priorities based on member input, putting members in direct conversation with policymakers, and keeping members informed. Given NVM's matrixed structure, the organization works to push for and communicate opportunities for constituents from the hubs and chapters to come and share their stories and points of view. Where possible, the organization aims to enable that form of feedback rather than NVM leadership serving as a go-between. However, this isn't always feasible — NVM's

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constituents, particularly those who are people of color, immigrants, and/or working class — are also those whom traditional lawmaking processes systematically exclude (whether due to the time of the meeting, the location, screening of invitees, etc.). In those cases, Nguyen and other NVM staff must be accountable to members, who trust staff to achieve the organization’s many policy efforts. “For us and for the members, we kept them informed every step of the way,” Nguyen says. “Even with me as the inside negotiator working with the governor’s office and with bill patrons ... I would go back to [specific members who had provided feedback] and say, ‘Here’s what’s on the table. Tell me what you want me to do. If you want me to kill the bill, I can kill the bill. If you want me to move forward, we can move forward’ ... that demonstrates to our members that they are actually in the driver’s seat with this decision.”

Hannah Recht, the lead organizer for the Loudoun County chapter, describes how a statewide fight around securing driver’s licenses emerged from door-to-door conversations. “The decision to work on driver’s licenses was based off of canvassing and informal surveying when the first NVM organizers started organizing in Loudoun,” Recht says. “NVM didn’t start by saying ‘We’re going to work on these issues’; they started to listen to what we were hearing in order to determine what the broad issue we should work on was.” Particularly in a suburban county with the highest median income of any county in the country, members in Loudoun County unified over the fact that undocumented residents were often seen as invisibly holding up the community. “We’re not just the people who clean your homes and serve you at restaurants, we have needs. We have culture and we are humans and here we are in the streets and you’re going to see it. I think that it feels really big to people ... driver’s licenses were a really specific issue to organize because it has such a direct material impact on people’s lives.” Members from the Loudoun County chapter went to Richmond to testify at a hearing, participate in marches, and attend town halls during the legislative session. The chapter mobilized large numbers of people on the driver’s license issue, and engaged both Spanish- and English-language media about it.

In spring 2020, the Virginia General Assembly adopted amendments from Governor Ralph Northam to ensure that driver privilege cards — typically issued to undocumented residents — would be made identical to state driver’s licenses. The long-term strategy that went into this victory was driven by a deeply participatory social home in which members were kept informed and consulted by Tram. For example, the organization assessed that they could get the bill through the state legislature if the framing was around driver privilege cards rather than a

Healthcare

All Virginians should have the opportunity to receive affordable, quality healthcare, including abortion coverage, and have access to essential emergency services, especially during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

HB1896/SB1276
Remove prohibition on abortion coverage from health insurance plans offered through VA's health benefits exchange.



HB2124
Ensures that testing for, treatment of, and vaccination against COVID-19 are considered covered emergency services for all Virginians, regardless of immigration status.



HJ537
Requests state agencies like the VDH to consider steps to address systemic racism and its impact on public health.



driver's license. Nguyen and NVM's policy staff asked members whether they would rather push on securing licenses, which was unlikely to pass that year. Members responded that they would much rather secure the privilege cards — a distinction from other organizations in the state that did not necessarily go back to their base to understand what type of legislative compromise strategy their constituencies would agree to. Similarly, the decision to lean into the housing recovery funding work came from members who were experiencing a tidal wave of evictions in the summer of 2020. As NVM heard from members across its chapters and hubs that, as Liss put it, "[housing] is the thing that matters," the organization began to identify what policy levers it could pull as well as how those could build upon the data and numbers they were seeing on the ground.

Conclusion

Navigating power relationships — responding to a constituent base while also influencing and maintaining alliances with elected officials — fuels much of NVM's strategy and work. NVM members were determined to hold state policymakers accountable on the housing legislation and decided to mobilize. "We had an in-person demonstration in Richmond. 'Look out the door, there's 100 people out there because of this, even in a pandemic,'" Liss recalls. "Our members' agitation is what led to the modifications that created this effort."

This choice was reflective of NVM's overall strategy. While other organizations might choose tradeoffs between different pieces of legislation or walk away from a negotiation in order to preserve a relationship with a policymaker, NVM only walks away if members agree. "That's why our policy team tackles over 200 pieces of legislation that covers a variety of issues," Nguyen says. "We hold a lot of different relationships with legislators and not all of them are with us on every single one of the issues that we work on. Our policy team would totally prefer if we only had to work on 20 bills every session. But so far ... everything that impacts our community is what we've taken on."

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