

**ADDRESS OF
GOVERNOR RALPH S. NORTHAM**

**The State of the Commonwealth
Address to the Joint Assembly
2019**



SENATE DOCUMENT NO. 1

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
RICHMOND
2019**

My fellow Virginians, ladies and gentlemen—good evening.

Speaker Cox, Senator Newman, Justices of the Supreme Court, Lieutenant Governor Fairfax, Attorney General Herring, distinguished members of the Virginia General Assembly—thank you for inviting me to be with you tonight.

Please join me in welcoming my wife, Virginia's First Lady Pamela Northam. I want to thank Pam for her focus on ensuring that every child in the Commonwealth is able to benefit from access to quality, early childhood education.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge a moment of history we are sharing together. This is the first time in the 400-year history of the Virginia General Assembly that a woman has led a legislative caucus.

Please join me in congratulating Leader Eileen Filler-Corn on her historic achievement.

And thank you, Delegate Toscano, for your years of service.

Finally, I want to recognize my cabinet and the thousands of Virginia state employees they represent for their committed service to our people. I'm often asked what has most impressed me as governor, and it's the hard work and talent of our thousands of state workers, from game wardens, to VDOT road crews, to state police.

Each of you works diligently to ensure that every corner of this Commonwealth is a place of opportunity for all.

It is an honor to serve as the 73rd Governor of this great Commonwealth. It's hard to believe that a year has already come and gone since I last addressed the General Assembly.

We've had a very successful year together, and Virginians are better for it.

In fact, we've been so successful together that I've already started thinking about the future, about 2020. And so tonight, I am proud to announce I am going to seriously explore a run for President ...

... of the Eastern Shore Antique Car Club.

In all seriousness, I am grateful for all that we have been able to accomplish, working together.

This last year has taught me a great deal, and I know that while it can often be difficult to serve in elected office, the work we do together is as important now as it ever has been.

We're a state that supports our veterans, embraces diversity and inclusion, and attracts visitors from around the world. We work every day to make sure that Virginia is a place of opportunity, where everyone can build the life they want to live.

With unemployment at the lowest levels in decades, a growing economy, expanding access to health coverage to 400,000 working Virginians, and investing record amounts in public schools and environmental protection, we can say with certainty that the State of our beloved Commonwealth is as strong as ever.

I believe Virginians select their leaders for one reason: to make this Commonwealth work better for them and their families, no matter who they are or where they live.

Putting politics aside for the good of the people shouldn't be hard. But as we are seeing up the road in Washington, some politicians have a way of making even the simplest things look difficult.

In recent weeks, our federal government has shut down, and thousands of Virginia's federal workers, as well as all of those Americans whom they serve, have paid the price.

Over the course of this 46-day session, Virginia can offer a different path forward.

I believe that most of the time, people find what they're looking for. If they're looking for division, they'll find it.

But if they—if we—look for areas where we can agree, we'll find them.

Throughout our history, Virginia has led the nation by example. The Virginia Way charges us to put people ahead of politics, and to leave this place better than we found it.

I am proud to say we're off to a good start.

In our first year working together, we have achieved major accomplishments that fulfilled our mandate to improve Virginians' lives.

We passed an historic budget that means 400,000 more Virginians will be able to see a doctor when they are sick.

We strengthened our Commonwealth's finances by shoring up our reserves and preserving our valuable Triple-A bond rating.

We broke down decades of gridlock on criminal justice reform by finally raising the felony larceny threshold.

We led the region in securing a dedicated source of revenue for Metro for the first time in the system's history.

We agreed to boost pay for our educators and retool our workforce development efforts.

We worked together to make government more efficient through regulatory reform, and to be a better steward of taxpayers' dollars.

We created a parental leave plan for state employees, and the House of Delegates and Senate did the same, providing parents an important opportunity to be with their new children.

And in the midst of a growing economy, and the lowest unemployment rate in seventeen years, we have built on our momentum and announced many new jobs and investments in every single corner of our Commonwealth.

The successes in this past year have come about not because I, or you legislators, did something individually—but because we worked together. When we work together and help provide a strong foundation for Virginians, our families and businesses thrive.

And while we've had a successful year, we can't rest on that. Every year we must make more progress toward a Commonwealth of opportunity for everyone.

When we invest in Virginians and their future in a fiscally responsible way, no one can stop us. We can again be the best state in the nation for business.

We can make sure the economy works well for everyone not just those at the top.

We have always been a national leader. Let us never abandon that mantle.

I spent my career as a child neurologist, seeing young patients. Over the span of those years, I saw thousands of children and their parents.

And I can't name a single instance when any of them asked me whether I was a Democrat or a Republican—nor did I ask them. They just wanted me to help them.

And that's what the people of Virginia want from us.

Last year, I promised that I would govern to get things done. I said that my goal would always be to do what was best for the people of Virginia. I promised I'd work with anyone to make our Commonwealth work better for all Virginians.

I believe there is no better place in this great country of ours to live, work, and raise a family than Virginia.

Let's renew that commitment to working together to build a Commonwealth where every person, particularly every child, has the same shot at a healthy, safe, and successful life.

I'm here tonight to tell you that the state of the Commonwealth is strong, and we are poised to make it even stronger.

Since I took office, we've announced more than 41,000 new jobs, with more than \$8 billion in new capital investment.

That means 41,000 more Virginians who can pay rent or mortgages, buy groceries and school supplies, and put paychecks to work in local businesses.

These new jobs represent people who can live in their hometowns, instead of leaving for a job somewhere else.

Growing up on the Eastern Shore, I know how young people leave our rural areas for jobs and don't come back.

That is why our Administration has made it a priority to ensure that every region of Virginia is part of our economic success—so that people can build their lives in the place of their choosing.

We still have work to do, but I'm pleased by the progress we have made so far.

This year, I've made nearly 100 visits to rural parts of Virginia to announce more than \$1.25 billion in new capital expenditures.

Tonight, I'm proud to make another one of these announcements.

Microsoft will inject significant capital investment to expand its datacenter campus in Mecklenburg County which will create more than 100 new jobs. This will be Microsoft's sixth expansion at that facility since 2010, which is great news for that area.

This is a huge win for rural Virginia and we should all be proud. I want to thank Senator Frank Ruff, Delegate Tommy Wright, and all the members who played a part in this.

I also want to welcome Jeremy Satterfield, the Virginia manager of TechSpark at Microsoft, who is in the gallery tonight. Microsoft's TechSpark program works to create more job opportunities in economically stressed areas, and southern Virginia is one of the regions where they're working.

With this Microsoft news, Amazon's decision to select Virginia for a new corporate headquarters, and Micron's expansion, it's clear that our efforts to bring new jobs and investments to our Commonwealth are paying off.

These companies are attracted to Virginia for our exceptional education system, our skilled workforce, and our strong business climate.

Virginia was once ranked as the number one state in the country in which to do business.

This year, we climbed in the rankings, from fifth to fourth. But we can't get back to number one if we aren't supporting our small business owners, the backbone of our economy.

As a small business owner myself, I'll never lose sight of that.

This partial government shutdown illustrates why, with some urgency, we need to continue to diversify our economy. No one region in Virginia should be reliant on one industry.

That's why I'm so encouraged to see the ingenuity of our small business owners as I travel across the state.

When businesses large and small want to call Virginia home, that's a one-two punch for our economy that can't be beat.

These businesses all need workers, and preparing Virginia's workforce for the jobs of the 21st century begins earlier than we think.

We cannot afford to wait until students enter kindergarten to begin preparing them for successful futures.

I want to thank our First Lady Pam Northam for leading a new version of the Children's Cabinet that is placing an unprecedented focus on early childhood development.

Thanks to their work, last week Virginia was awarded a \$10 million federal grant to improve our statewide early education system – and that's just the beginning.

With the help of Virginia's first-ever Chief School Readiness Officer, we are working with leaders across the state and with many of the people here tonight, to ensure that every child has access to quality early childhood programs.

Just a few short weeks ago, I shared my proposed budget amendments with the Joint Money Committees.

These amendments reflect the unique opportunity we have this session: to make forward-looking investments in our success, to further strengthen our reserves, and meet our existing obligations.

We have a world-class education system—but we need to make long-term investments to sustain that quality for our students and to ensure we remain competitive in a 21st century economy.

That's why I am eager to work with you to give our teachers the largest single-year pay raise in 15 years.

This isn't just about the educators who deserve to be paid more. It's about improving the education we offer our children by ensuring that we can attract and retain the best and brightest educators to classrooms in every corner of our Commonwealth.

Raising teacher pay is only part of the puzzle when it comes to making sure that every Virginia student is able to reach their full potential. Schools, educational leaders, and parents across the Commonwealth have been clear that students need a variety of services to succeed in the classroom.

That's why I've proposed to fund more positions for school counselors statewide, and additional flexible funding so that school divisions can make their own decisions about which services will most benefit their students.

Early childhood and K-12 education are the backbone of our efforts to prepare students for successful lives, bringing skills to jobs—but in a modern economy we can't stop there.

The good jobs of the future will almost always require some form of training after high school. However, at a time when college costs threaten to price many students out of the market, the good news is that some of the many rewarding jobs in the most exciting fields don't require a four-year degree.

If Virginia is going to succeed in the economy of the future, we must expand our advantage in higher education and continue to reform our approach to workforce training.

That effort should begin with better aligning our four-year universities, community colleges and skills training programs with the needs of modern day students and the employers who are waiting to hire them.

And we need to work even harder to make postsecondary education more affordable and accessible to all students.

We're working with the Virginia Community College System to reframe their programming, so that students can get the skills they need on the front end for 21st century jobs.

Our training certificate programs and our higher education system need to work hand in hand. And they need to be affordable.

Expensive tuition and high student debt can close the door to opportunity for too many people.

My budget would offer more tuition assistance, and requires our institutions to create tuition predictability plans.

It is high time we began regulating the companies that service our student loans. While people may not be able to avoid taking on debt to get an education, they should be able to count on basic consumer protections.

I'm also proposing specific tuition assistance for National Guard members so that the men and women who step forward to keep us safe in times of need can advance in their civilian careers as well.

Our National Guard members offer critical help, responding during and after disasters or other missions.

As we've learned from economic development projects, including the Amazon headquarters, good jobs come to states and communities whose workers are ready for high tech jobs.

That is why our administration is proud to partner with legislative leaders of both parties in proposing a Tech Talent Investment Fund, which will offer grants to our higher education institutions to help them provide more computer science degrees. Our goal is to produce up to 17,500 more bachelor's degrees in computer science over the next 20 years. This is an investment in our people and our future.

Tonight, I'm laying out the roadmap to a competitive, brilliant future for all Virginians.

Until we come together to ensure universal broadband access, we are keeping opportunity out of reach for entire communities in Virginia.

When a community doesn't have reliable Internet access, it can't attract businesses, support its home-grown entrepreneurs, keep its students up to date, or use telehealth to keep people healthy.

The ability to get online anywhere—that's what makes a Commonwealth of opportunity.

Weeks ago, I shared an ambitious budget proposal to speed up our progress and achieve universal broadband access within the next few years.

This is probably the number one issue I hear from Virginians as I travel around the state, and the number one issue I hear from legislators—both Republicans and Democrats.

Virginia can be a national leader in providing access to its residents if we work together and take advantage of this opportunity.

We've talked a lot about jobs and economic opportunity. But we know that a strong workforce has to be a healthy workforce.

Last year we joined together to expand Medicaid coverage to more working Virginians.

We knew people wanted and needed this.

One of them was Kara Murdock. When Kara was 23, she had to have her arm amputated below the elbow due to a blood clot. This left her unable to do her work as a dog groomer, or continue her studies to become a paramedic.

She has had numerous surgeries and complications, and has been uninsured since she was dropped from her parents' insurance when she turned 26.

Kara knew what Medicaid expansion could mean for her. So on Halloween night, Kara camped out so that she could be the first in line to apply for health coverage under the new eligibility rules.

Kara is here with us tonight. Please give her a warm welcome.

Kara, thank you for being here and letting me share your story, so that we can appreciate the impact of our work together on Medicaid expansion last year.

Kara wasn't the only one who knew what this care would mean. On the first day of enrollment, our call center had a flood of 6,000 calls.

To date, more than 200,000 Virginia adults have already enrolled through our expanded Medicaid program. Their coverage began at the start of this new year.

No longer will these Virginians have to worry about whether they can afford to see a doctor, or get worrisome symptoms checked out. No longer will they fear that one illness will drive them to bankruptcy.

Now if they need it, they can get treatment for mental illness or substance abuse disorder.

There are thousands of Virginians with stories like Kara's. This new coverage will help them stay healthy, work, and lead more productive lives.

It will also serve as a reminder of what we in this room can achieve when we put politics aside and do what we know is right.

Virginians are counting on us to bring that same approach to our work this year. Few issues are more deserving of our intense focus than the opioid crisis.

Last year, we lost 1,227 Virginians to opioid overdose. We lost 1,534 Virginians to overdoses from all drugs.

It is my belief that an overdose death is a preventable one, and I want to do everything that I can as governor and as a doctor to bring awareness to this epidemic.

That's why I traveled to all six of Virginia's medical schools last year, to teach our future and current doctors about their role in fighting the opioid crisis. As physicians, we need to think more innovatively about the ways we treat acute and chronic pain.

At each of my stops on this lecture tour, I was accompanied by a young man from Allegheny County who is recovering from addiction. I first met him and his father at a law enforcement event on the Eastern Shore.

An honor roll student and son of a well-respected sheriff, his journey started after fracturing his leg in a high school football game. He was rushed to the hospital and started on dilaudid for his pain. He was prescribed other narcotics and became addicted.

When his prescriptions ran out, he turned to heroin, and then fentanyl. To support his addiction and to avoid the symptoms of being dopesick, he took actions that led to run-ins with the law. Eventually he spent 18 months in jail.

With medically assisted treatment and counseling, the support of his family, and a strong faith in God, he has been clean for over a year.

He and his father have put their family's story together in a powerful video. Please welcome Ryan Hall and his father, Sheriff Kevin Hall, to the gallery.

Their story inspired my Grand Rounds lecture, but it also drove an important point home.

This crisis does not discriminate—it can affect anyone from your family members, to your friends, to your neighbors, even yourself. If you need help, or know someone who needs help, please know that we are here for you.

We've seen a slight drop in overdose deaths due to opioids, but we've also seen an increase in deaths from other drugs.

So we must continue the fight with this in mind: our real adversary is addiction, and addiction will always find another drug.

We still have work to do to make sure everyone has access to health care.

That means all health care, including reproductive care. I'm proposing that we put into the Code of Virginia that a woman has the fundamental right to make her own health care decisions.

By working together, we can do so much more to improve access and cost for all Virginians. It doesn't matter what type of healthcare plan you have—healthcare costs are rising across the nation.

I am committed to working with you to address the root causes of these increasing costs. We can emphasize prevention, and work to evolve toward an outcome-based system, rather than a quantity-based system.

And we can use innovation and data collection and analysis to help us become a world leader in individualized health care, right here in Virginia.

We have already demonstrated that we have the capacity to act together to improve the health and wellbeing of our fellow Virginians—I am confident we can do it again this year.

I'm a parent. Many of us in here are parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. I think we can agree that we all want our children to grow up to be healthy, happy adults. That's what every parent wants for their child.

Every child in Virginia should have the same chance to lead a safe, healthy, and successful adult life.

And if we agree that every child should have the chance to reach adulthood, then we need to consider what we can do to make our Commonwealth a safer place for our children to grow up.

We want to be sure that all school resource officers are well-trained, so I'm proposing that we ensure all school resource officers go through training approved by our Department of Criminal Justice Services.

Right now, only grant-funded resource officers go through that training.

I want to take a moment to recognize the Student Safety Work Group of the Children's Cabinet for their hard work to develop recommendations on this important topic. I would also like to acknowledge the hard work of leaders in both chambers, and in both parties, to address the many challenges our children face in their schools.

If we want every Virginian to have a chance at a healthy, safe, successful life then we need to have a conversation about responsible gun ownership.

I recognize that this is a topic where it has been difficult to have meaningful dialogue.

Dialogue, by its definition, is an exchange of ideas and opinions in order to resolve a problem. I hope we can all agree that we have a problem.

In 2017, 1,028 Virginians died of gun-related causes.

In comparison, that's more deaths due to gun violence than the 956 Virginians who died due to vehicle accidents in 2017.

We have recognized that we have a problem with road safety and vehicle deaths—and we have acted together to prevent future ones.

My administration has launched the Executive Leadership Team on Highway Safety, and I know there is legislation this session, including efforts to strengthen our Move Over law, aimed at protecting our first responders.

If we are able to agree that we need to act when we have a problem with highway safety and preventable deaths, then surely we can agree to work together to keep more Virginians alive by improving gun safety.

As I said earlier, this has to be a dialogue—that's a two-way exchange of ideas.

This year I'm proposing we act to approve an "extreme risk law."

It creates a legal way for law enforcement and the courts to temporarily remove firearms from someone who has shown dangerous behavior, and who poses a risk to themselves or others.

This idea has passed Republican legislatures in other states and been signed by Republican governors.

It shouldn't be a partisan issue to make sure that weapons are not in the hands of people who pose a threat, especially when the threat is to their own safety or their family's safety.

As we work to make our roads safer by focusing on driver behavior, we also need to be sure our roads themselves are as safe as possible.

Along I-81, from Winchester to Bristol, it's becoming more difficult for traffic to flow steadily and safely.

While 81 is a major corridor for interstate travel, it's also a heavily used local road.

Stretches of I-81 have become safety hazards, and accidents and delays also impact local commerce.

Businesses, residents, and officials along the corridor agree that I-81 needs significant improvements.

So I'm proposing to establish the I-81 Corridor Improvement Program.

This legislation will provide a dedicated funding source for I-81.

We all know that current resources are not adequate to the task of making I-81 a better, safer road. I'm happy to say that we're working across the aisle, with legislators from both parties whose districts include I-81, to make this happen.

If we want to ensure that every Virginian has the same shot at economic opportunity, we need to position ourselves to respond to the growing reality of climate change.

These changes are having an impact on our communities and our economies, whether you are facing coastal flooding in Hampton Roads or storm effects in the Southside and the Southwest.

I have shared my budget proposals to make historic investments in the protection of our environment and our water quality. These proposals will lead to cleaner water and air for all Virginians, and they will also position us to create the next generation of energy jobs in solar, wind and other emerging technologies. Time is of the essence—the time to address these challenges is now.

Our farmers are working to do their part to support agricultural best practices and reduce runoff from their farms into the creeks nearby.

With us tonight in the gallery is Kendall Tyree, executive director of the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts and vice-chair of Virginia Forever.

Kendall, we thank you and the groups you work with for all the work you do on agricultural best management practices and natural resources issues.

We're glad to support them in those efforts by doing our part to support pollution reduction efforts across the board. That's why I proposed increased funding for programs to help reduce runoff and for our Stormwater Local Assistance Fund.

And this should be the session where we come together and require clean closure of coal ash ponds throughout our Bay watershed. These ponds are in Republican and Democratic districts, and Virginians don't view them through political lenses—they want them closed cleanly and their waterways protected.

The environmental damage that Hurricane Florence caused in North Carolina showed us what will happen to these ponds if we don't act now.

Tonight we have some good news from our criminal justice system to announce—for the third year in a row, our prison recidivism rate is the lowest in the country.

This is due to our re-entry programs and treatment offered by the Virginia Department of Corrections. Tonight our director of the Department of Corrections, Harold Clarke, is with us in the gallery.

I want to thank Harold for his department's work to make sure that we do as much as possible to prepare people to leave our corrections system and rebuild their lives.

We want to keep people safe. But we shouldn't use valuable law enforcement time, or costly prison space, on laws that don't enhance public safety.

So I'm proposing that we decriminalize simple possession of marijuana.

Current law imposes a maximum 30 days in jail for a first offense of marijuana possession.

Making simple possession a civil penalty will ease overcrowding in our jails and prisons, and free up our law enforcement and court resources for offenses that are a true threat to public safety.

Moving forward on this front will have the same significance as our work together to increase the felony larceny threshold: one mistake won't define Virginians for the rest of their lives.

We can continue our progress on criminal justice reform by ending the practice of suspending driver's licenses over failure to pay court costs and fees, and by ending the suspension of licenses for non-driving offenses.

When we take away people's driver's licenses, we make it harder for them to get to work, and thus make it even more difficult for them to pay their court costs.

We shouldn't be punishing people for being poor.

These simple reforms to our criminal justice system will make our Commonwealth a more fair and just place without threatening the safety of our communities. Let's work together to pass them this session.

We have a chance this session to provide targeted tax relief to Virginians who aren't seeing much help from the federal tax changes.

Our tax code should work for everyone—not just the highest earners. That’s only fair. But Washington is actually making these disparities worse.

In Virginia, we can work together to restore balance and fairness on the state level.

I’ve put a proposal on the table to respond to the federal tax changes by making our existing Earned Income Tax Credit refundable.

This credit already exists in our law, and it benefits middle-class workers—our teachers and law enforcement officers, our veterans, the folks working at restaurants and department stores and small businesses. Republicans and Democrats alike have supported this credit, because it works.

Over the course of the last year, we have had conversations about incentivizing Virginians to get back into the workforce—my proposal does exactly that, because you only get this credit if you work and pay taxes.

This is a chance for us to have a dialogue about making sure the system is fair for every Virginian. When corporate stockholders benefit but a teacher does not, that isn’t what I call a fair system.

That’s why I made this proposal—because I want our response to these tax changes to be fair to Virginians in every district, every community.

It’s clear that we need to conform our tax code to the federal code, because Virginians deserve a simplified process. After that, I’m open to a discussion about how we respond to these tax changes in a fair way. I’ve put my ideas on the table. My priorities remain ensuring that our tax changes are fair, that we put money into reserves and pay our bills, and that we invest in our priorities. I know others have ideas, and I look forward to having a dialogue about our priorities.

We must make sure that one good job is enough for a person to live on, and that hard-working Virginians in every locality and region benefit from our tax proposals.

This year, we will mark a significant anniversary of Virginia’s long history of representative democracy. This tradition stretches back 400 years, well before the birth of this nation.

Let’s take a moment to reflect on that long and complex history. The story of Virginia is rooted in the simultaneous pursuit of both liberty and enslavement.

As we approach the anniversary of the first representative General Assembly in the New World, we have a responsibility to confront this truth.

It obligates us to the full and true exercise of democracy. In this day and age, that means ensuring the elimination of unnecessary and prohibitive barriers to voting.

I’m proposing we finally allow no-excuse absentee voting.

If we are going to work together to ensure that every Virginian has equal opportunity for a successful life, that means enshrining equal rights for women and legal protections against discrimination in our laws. This is not a partisan issue, and legislators from both parties have long championed this idea. Virginia can be the 38th and final state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment this year—it’s time we do so.

A few weeks ago, I came before your money committees to talk about budget proposals.

I said then, and I'll say to you all tonight, Virginia is in a good place.

Our economy is strong. Our unemployment is low.

We're in a position to put money in savings, invest in priorities, and provide targeted tax relief to the middle-class Virginians who need it most.

I'm not going to pretend that there won't be 140 campaigns to run after we adjourn here. But this isn't Washington—we come to Richmond to do the people's work, the way they expect us to do it.

And there's a lot we can accomplish together.

I know that not everyone will agree with the ideas I've outlined tonight.

But I don't believe the people of Virginia elected me to sit on the sidelines. They didn't elect any of us for that.

But they did elect us to work together, to do the best we can for them.

And they elected us to be thoughtful about our work here. They want us to give true consideration to a variety of ideas. That's the Virginia Way.

I hope that as we go through the next 46 days together, we give consideration to each other, and to our ideas. It can be tempting to retreat to our corners and shout at each other. But I believe we all have that internal moral compass, the one that guides us toward the right thing to do. I hope we all follow it this session.

We can come together, to ensure that we keep our economy strong in every corner of Virginia.

We can come together, to make sure that our children have the best chance possible to grow into healthy adults.

We can come together, to make sensible criminal justice reforms that will keep people who shouldn't be in jail, out of jail.

We can come together, to ensure that Virginia, the home of the oldest representative body in the new world, is also the home of voting laws that put the voters' needs first.

And we can come together to make sure that we're building a Commonwealth of opportunity, where everyone has the tools they need to build good lives.

We can do all of this and a lot more.

I believe strongly that we often find what we're looking for.

If we come here looking for gridlock and partisan battles, we will likely find those.

But if we look for what unites us, what gives us the best opportunity to get things done, we will find that.

We're not going to agree on everything, but if we look for what we have in common, we'll do better work for the people of Virginia.

I look forward to working with all of you to find our common ground.

Thank you for your willingness to serve our great Commonwealth.

May God bless all of you, and may God bless Virginia.

