



Fr. Gerry Creedon of St. Charles Borromeo parish in Arlington.



Members of VOICE — Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement — gather at an interfaith service at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond.

Interfaith Group Rallies in Richmond

Seeking to protect dental care in state budget.

More than 200 individuals from VOICE — Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement — traveled to Richmond on Tuesday, March 2, to urge the budget conferees to adopt the Senate's bi-partisan budget that restores and protects the dental health safety net.

They met with senators and delegates individually and then gathered with 17 Northern Virginia legislative leaders, including three of the budget conferees at a meeting in the Capitol.

VOICE, which successfully fought to increase dental services to low-income adults in Northern Virginia, including a \$100,000 increase in funding for the Northern Virginia Dental Clinic, opposes proposed budget cuts that would slash dental services for poor.

State Sen. Janet Howell, Senate Finance Chair Charles Colgan of Prince William County and Senate Majority Leader Richard Saslaw urged the organization to continue to pressure the conferees over the week. Del. Richard Anderson, one of two Republican delegates to attend the VOICE gathering, committed to spread the word

among his colleagues.

"A budget is a moral document" stated Fr. Gerry Creedon, of St. Charles Borromeo parish in Arlington, "VOICE believes that our budget should not be balanced on the backs of the poor — pregnant women and children in need of health care and the vulnerable and the infirm who depend on Virginia's dental safety net."

Joe Pettit, a V.O.I.C.E. leader from Burke, explained that Virginia is already among the lowest states in providing dental services to low-income adults, and while the dental community has been generous in organizing two-day Mission of Mercy (MOM) clinics around the state, this is not the solution: "A recent Pew study has just documented the Commonwealth's progress in increasing access to dental care for children... do we want to squander that progress by making these reckless cuts?"

VOICE speakers praised the restoration of cuts to dental programs in the Senate budget proposal, and acknowledged as "good stewardship" efforts in both the Senate and House budgets to avoid deeper cuts to health and safety net programs by proposing fees and closing tax loopholes. "In

times like these, the wisdom of our faith traditions instructs us to protect the vulnerable," Creedon stated. "The suffering must be shared."

The Rev. Keith Savage of First Baptist Church in Manassas asked senators and delegates to urge support for the bi-partisan Senate budget proposals, including: no cuts to free clinics, community health centers, and the Virginia Health Foundation; keep all dental health clinics open, and no reduction of FAMIS, FAMIS MOMS, Virginia's health insurance programs for children and pregnant mothers.

AFTER MEETING at the Capitol, VOICE leaders prayed for the budget conferees at an interfaith service at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. VOICE is a multi-racial, multi-faith, multi-issue, multi-county, strictly non-partisan citizens' power organization dedicated to making change on social justice issues — immigration, affordable housing, healthcare, among others — affecting the lives of low- and middle income residents in four Northern Virginia jurisdictions: Prince William, Fairfax, and Arlington counties as well as the City of Alexandria. VOICE's 45 member institutions — congregations, synagogues, and mosques — represent 150,000-plus persons.