

## Rattling State's Cash Jar

**Governor commits to working toward expanding dental coverage to uninsured adults.**

BY MICHAEL LEE POPE  
THE GAZETTE

**A**s Washington grapples with health-care reform, Willie Jackson is facing his own health-care crisis. He must choose between paying for a place to stay or scraping together enough money to fix his seven rotting teeth. It's a choice that illustrates the difficult real-world decisions people without dental insurance face every day.

"My teeth are loose," said Jackson. "They are so loose, I have to be very careful about what I eat."



PHOTO BY LOUISE KRAFFT/GAZETTE

**Rev. Tuck Bowerfind of St. Luke's Episcopal in Mount Vernon and Rev. Keith Savage of the First Baptist Church in Manassas question Gov. Tim Kaine on action that might be taken on VOICE's proposals.**

Jackson told his story to Democratic Gov. Tim Kaine and 1,100 participants of a new interfaith religious group known as Virginians Organized for Justice and Political Participation — known as VOICE. The group, which was created last October, called a mass

meeting at T.C. Williams High School this week to address Virginia's lack of dental care for low-income residents and the persistent delays in processing naturalization applications of Northern Virginia residents. After hearing

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## Faith Groups, Governor Push for Health Reform

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personal and at times emotional testimony, the governor pledged to "rattle the cash jar" for expanding dental coverage for the uninsured.

"Candidly this issue was not on my radar screen before," said Kaine. "But it's on my to-do list now because of VOICE."

Kaine reminded the capacity crowd that in the first year of his administration he worked to expand dental coverage to 100,000 additional low-income children early in his administration. But he admitted that after achieving that victory, the issue of expanding dental coverage to the uninsured was no longer a concern. That's why VOICE leaders said after the meeting they counted the governor's commitment to rattling the cash jar as an important victory — even if the governor stopped short of promising he would find funding for the issue.

"To be honest, I would have liked to hear him say he was going to put it in the budget," said Kerry Kincannon, pastor of Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church. "But I understand his constraints."

**THE OTHER ISSUE** on the agenda Monday night at T.C. Williams High School was the persistent federal delays in processing naturalization applications of Northern Virginia residents. Although Virginia's two United States senators were unable to attend the meeting because of business at the Capitol, their representatives were presented with 200 individual cases VOICE leaders said demanded their attention. And they pressed for speeding up the processing time in Northern Virginia, which lags behind other areas of the country.

"We have an immigration backlog in this part of the county that just doesn't happen in other parts of the county," said Kincannon. "We've heard of cases that can take a year or more to process. That's just too long, especially for families that might not be able to pay a second application fee after the first one expires."



PHOTO BY LOUISE KRAFFT/GAZETTE

**Gov. Tim Kaine takes the stage at T.C. Williams joining over 20 religious leaders from Prince William, Fairfax and Arlington Counties and the City of Alexandria and U.S. Sen. Jim Webb's Chief of Staff Paul Reagan.**

The religious leaders also pressed the senatorial proxies for greater accountability from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service on processing citizenship, permanent residency and asylum applications from families in Northern Virginia. The audience gasped when one woman explained that she wasn't able to attend the funeral of her son in Indonesia because she was told she would not be able to return to the United States. Kaine agreed that the woman deserved better.

"How hard is it?" the governor asked, his voice cracking with emotion. "It's not that hard."

**SINCE ITS CREATION** in October, the multi-faith organization has been pushing for a number of specific action items across the political spectrum. Earlier this year it

was able to persuade elected officials in Alexandria and Fairfax County to maintain funding levels for affordable housing and expand dental coverage locally through the Northern Virginia Dental Clinic. In the future, VOICE leaders say, they would like to meet with U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano to press for speedier processing of applications for citizenship, green cards and political asylum. In the future, leaders say, the group will seek to broaden its advocacy for maintaining affordable housing in Northern Virginia. One of the key areas where they plan to focus their efforts in Mount Vernon is a site off Popkins Lane in the area of Woodley Hills Trailer Park known as "North Hill."

"We are not a single-issue organization," said Kincannon. "And we plan to be around for a while."

VOICE was founded on Oct. 5, 2008 as a multi-faith, multi-racial, non-partisan coalition of religious organizations seeking social justice. Participating groups include a range of the Northern Virginia religious community, and has grown from 40 member organizations to 48 since it was created. Leaders say the focus of the group is to advocate for low-income residents of Northern Virginia — specifically on issues pertaining to affordable housing, immigration and health care.

"VOICE has shown we are willing and able to use our power network with elected officials to craft solutions to improve the lives of all our families and communities," said Leonard Hamlin, one of the chief clergy leaders of the organization. "It is in times like these that we need to stand up with the most vulnerable."