

VIRGINIA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AGENDA

CLOSING THE EDUCATION GAP

Race-based education gaps continue to exist at all levels, from early childhood and K-12 to post-secondary education and on-the-job training. These education gaps perpetuate inequalities in employment, income and wealth development.

RECOMMENDATIONS :

- **Close the Digital Education Divide:** Broadband access is a necessity for learning in today's world. Closing the digital divide will require both government and private sector investment. Federal, state and local government need a collaborative broadband strategy that addresses deployment issues such as funding and permitting as well as connectivity issues.
- **Expand “Earn & Learn” and Credentialing Programs:** Many of the jobs of today and tomorrow require more than a high school degree, but less than a four-year or even two-year college degree. Virginia and the private sector need to continue their efforts to recognize, accredit, and help individuals access credentialing (i.e. Virginia's FastForward Program) and “earn and learn” programs (i.e. Newport News Shipbuilding's Apprentice School) as alternative career pathways and provide financial assistance to help individuals access these programs.
- **Promote the “Soft-Skills” Necessary for Employment:** So-called “soft-skills” like communication, problem solving, teamwork, and leadership are often as important as hard skills in securing and sustaining gainful employment. Education officials and the business community should collaborate to provide soft-skills programs as part of the curriculum in local schools.

CLOSING THE EMPLOYMENT GAP

For decades, Black unemployment rates have been consistently twice as high as white unemployment rates.

RECOMMENDATIONS :

- **Expand Availability of Quality, Affordable Childcare:** For many Virginians, the lack of available quality childcare is a barrier to employment, especially in low-income communities. State and local officials should work with the private sector to streamline and provide support for the expansion of childcare in such communities. These efforts not only address the disparity issue, but in light of the COVID crisis, also help to return workers to their jobs, especially parents who need child care if schools are operating virtually or on a hybrid basis.
- **Improve Minority Work-based Learning through Internships and Apprenticeships:** Personal business networks, work-based skills, and knowledge are especially important to those starting their careers, but many minorities lack access to such opportunities. The state and private sector should work to create more pathways, such as internships and apprenticeships, for minorities.
- **Expand Talent Pipeline Programs to Underserved Communities:** Expand talent pipeline programs to link job training to the skills employers need to fill current and future jobs.

CLOSING THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP GAP

Only 9.4% of U.S. business owners are Black. This statistic highlights the need for increased access to available resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS :

- **Reform Occupational Licensing Restrictions:** Nearly 1 in 4 jobs today require a state occupational license. A prior criminal conviction can by itself prevent a person from receiving a license. A state license may be denied regardless of how long ago the conviction was or whether the crime is relevant to the occupation. The state should narrowly target any license restrictions and provide a means to recognize rehabilitation.
- **Improve Access to Capital:** Lack of access to capital is a significant problem for most entrepreneurs but is especially acute for Black entrepreneurs. The federal and state governments should initiate a process to develop recommendations for changes in existing law and regulations that would improve access to capital for minority-owned businesses.
- **Entrepreneurial Education:** Entrepreneurship opportunities can be limited for minorities. Virginia should create a program to award grants to organizations to provide business counseling and entrepreneurial development training to the minority community. In addition, entrepreneurial programs should be included in educational curriculum beginning in elementary school.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

A prior conviction makes re-entry into society and the economy disproportionately challenging for Black Americans.

RECOMMENDATIONS :

- **Improve Job Training and Educational Opportunities for the Incarcerated:** Allow those in prison to access financial aid programs and educational opportunities. Allowing the incarcerated to pursue educational opportunities while serving time will improve rehabilitation, re-entry, and post-prison job prospects.
- **Reform Occupational Licensing Restrictions:** Nearly 1 in 4 jobs today require a state occupational license. A prior criminal conviction can by itself prevent a person from receiving a license. A state license may be denied regardless of how long ago the conviction was or whether the crime is relevant to the occupation. The state should narrowly target any license restrictions and provide a means to recognize rehabilitation.
- **Offer “Ready to Work” Initiative:** Provide federal and state funds and grants for a “Ready to Work” training program to provide inmates with critical job skills training prior to release.
- **Expungement:** The state should create a process for sealing or expunging certain non-violent and low-level arrests and convictions by making it automatic after a certain period of time after individuals have fulfilled their legal obligations without re-arrest or conviction. It is important to note that any expungement process should consider that federal and state laws impose various employment and licensing restrictions on those with criminal records, such as banking and financial services, government contracting, certain government positions, child care services, healthcare services, and law enforcement, for example.
- **Second Chance Hiring:** To encourage employers to hire individuals with criminal records, the Commonwealth should create immunity for employers from causes of action related to negligent hiring.
- **Sentencing Reform:** Common sense sentencing reform is another mechanism for addressing the economic barriers to employment. The 2018 First Step Act struck down excessive federal sentencing guidelines, such as “Three Strikes You’re Out,” for a range of non-violent federal crimes. Federal judges were also given greater discretion in sentencing non-violent offenders. In an effort to reduce unnecessary incarceration and proportionality in sentencing, the state should study Virginia’s criminal sentencing laws to ensure the judicial system balances punishment, restitution, and public safety with the need for individuals to be successful members of society.