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## In This Issue:

- Get ready for Giving Day - February 21-22!
- CECE workshop focuses on building sustainable partnerships
- Meet a CECE Advisory Board Member: Erik Johnston, Virginia Community Action Partnership
- News roundup

## Get ready for Giving Day - February 21-22!



It's almost time for [Giving Day](#) – a special 24-hour event where Hokies throughout the world come together in the spirit of Ut Prosim (That I May Serve). With your help, we will make this the best Giving Day yet!

This Giving Day, CECE aims to raise funds to support its Economic Development Studio class and other student led projects.

We look forward to seeing the impact we have, together!

**Learn more and give here:** <https://cece.vt.edu/index/give.html>

## Workshop focuses on building sustainable partnerships



Afroze Mohammed, associate director of strategic alliances for the Center for Economic and Community Engagement, and program manager Quina Weber-Shirk led a partnership workshop Jan. 12 for the center's faculty and staff. The workshop centered around how to build strong partnerships within the university and community.

Participants discussed articles and responded to the following questions:

- What former contacts and colleagues do you plan to reconnect with to gain perspectives?
- What can we learn from community partnerships run by other universities?

The workshop included two breakout sessions and small-group discussions. The first breakout focused on the history of ongoing CECE partnerships across the following projects and programs:

- [Promoting Careers in Aquaculture](#) — Mallory Tuttle, associate director of the Newport News Center.
- [Vibrant Virginia](#) — Scott Tate, associate director for community innovations.
- [Build Back Better Regional Challenge/Tech Hubs Strategy Development Grant](#) — Sarah Lyon-Hill, associate director for research development.
- [Verge Alliance](#) — Ashley Posthumus, economic development specialist.

The second breakout session focused on how to initiate and sustain partnerships with internal Virginia Tech contacts (Mohammed), [GO Virginia](#) applicants and sub-grantees (Weber-Shirk), and planning district commissions and other local partners (Anna Nagorniuk).

The workshop was part of the strategic planning work the center began in 2019.

# Meet a CECE Advisory Board Member: Erik Johnston, Virginia Community Action Partnership



*Erik Johnston serves as the president and CEO for the Virginia Community Action Partnership (VACAP), the state association for the 31 community action agencies in Virginia that works to create pathways from poverty to prosperity. Over the course of his career, he has served as the associate legislative director for the National Association of Counties, the director of government affairs for the Virginia Association of Counties, deputy policy director in the Governor's office, and the director of the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). He has a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Mary Washington and a master's degree in public administration from Virginia Tech.*

## **1. What does a day in your life look like as president and CEO of the Virginia Community Action Partnership?**

I love my work because I deeply believe in our mission of building partnerships to create pathways from poverty to prosperity for Virginians experiencing poverty. Every day is different. I spend my days training our members, developing and implementing partnerships on their behalf, and advocating for the solutions community action believes will truly move families out of poverty.

VACAP implements training and technical assistance efforts for our members and partners. This includes virtual and in person events for CEOs, senior leaders, program managers, front line staff, and central office staff of community action agencies and our partners. One of the key benefits of associations is connecting with peers to learn best practices, support each other through challenges, and to develop professional friendships that you have on speed dial.

We are always seeking partners to collaborate with on grant applications aligned with our mission. We doubled our budget over the past year with grants to serve Virginians in whole family wraparound services, digital equity/opportunity, energy efficiency, and more.

We partner with the Virginia Department of Social Services, Virginia Housing, DHCD, Virginia Energy, and many other state agencies in service delivery. This General Assembly session we are advocating for expansion of the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Network/CASH Campaign that VACAP oversees, along with moving a whole

family approach from a service delivery pilot to a statewide effort. The results of this nationwide best practice have been incredible in helping Virginians achieve their dreams for their whole family in overcoming poverty.

## **2. What projects are you currently working on with the Virginia Community Action Partnership?**

One of our most exciting projects is the Whole Family Pilot Project. We are working to secure more funding in that space from the General Assembly and from private/public sector sources. The effort serves families, both children and parents, and helps them increase their income and achieve their dreams and goals. This is a program we feel a strong passion for because we've seen the results of it, and it points to the core mission of community action – to move families out of poverty. We have six pilots across the state in diverse geographies and are working on taking the pilot effort to a statewide program to help more families. This is truly the future of human services delivery as we are helping families get trained in higher paying jobs and ensuring we have coaches with small caseloads that have the time to help families navigate the resources available to overcome the benefits cliff. These coaches stick with families and help overcome barriers to training and employment such as transportation, child care, mental health, and more.

## **3. What is your proudest accomplishment over the course of your career?**

I'm really proud of my work during the pandemic. I worked with the Department of Housing and Community Development and other partners in the public and private sector on eviction prevention, broadband expansion, and economic collaboration (GO Virginia). Virginia led the nation in providing rent relief at scale first, which helped renters and landlords during the crisis and implemented a bold goal to seek to fully fund a public/private partnership to achieve universal broadband. It was amazing to work with the team, DHCD, and the partners in communities that made this happen. During that time, I was also really impressed by community action and their work on the front lines of the human services and economic empowerment spaces.

## **4. What do you like most about being a part of CECE's advisory board?**

I love hearing about the current projects underway and the vision for future projects. I also love getting to interact with a diverse group of people and organizations from across the state that are working to make a difference in the commonwealth.

## **5. How would you like to collaborate with CECE in the future?**

I'd like to continue exploring possibilities for overlapping our missions and figuring out ways that community action can partner with initiatives in workforce development, regional collaboration, digital equity, human services, and more. Our organizations are alike in the way that we're trying to create connections across a lot of different types of partnerships.

## **6. What is the best advice you've ever received?**

Don't be afraid of failure and be entrepreneurial in your public sector work. Don't let the fear of something going wrong prevent you from going big and bold. I've worked for public sector organizations where the leader shared that advice with me and others, and it's something I always remember when I'm trying to do something new and innovative. It is empowering to know that failure is okay and part of the process to achieving great things in service to others.

## **7. What books have you read recently that you would recommend?**

I recommend *Poverty, by America* written by Matthew Desmond. It is a short and inspiring read that dares to dream big about how poverty is a policy choice and there are multiple solutions to overcome it, many of which have bipartisan support. In community action, we have a history of working in a bipartisan manner to support the bold vision that poverty can be overcome.

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## News roundup

[CECE connects with universities across the country at UEDA Summit](#) (VT Center for Economic and Community Engagement Blog)

[GOVA Region 2 project Talent Pathways Initiative hires coordinator to facilitate connections](#) (VT Center for Economic and Community Engagement Blog)

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