

February 22, 2019

The Honorable Ralph Northam
Governor
P.O. Box 1475
Richmond, VA 23218

The Honorable Mark Herring
Attorney General
202 North Ninth Street
Richmond, VA 23219

The Honorable Kirk Cox
Speaker, Virginia House of Delegates
1000 Bank Street
Richmond, VA 23219

The Honorable David Toscano
Minority Leader, Virginia House of Delegates
1000 Bank Street
Richmond, VA 23219

The Honorable Thomas Norment
Majority Leader, Virginia Senate
1000 Bank Street
Richmond, VA 23219

The Honorable Dick Saslaw
Minority Leader, Virginia Senate
1000 Bank Street
Richmond, VA 23219

The Honorable Lamont Bagby
Chair, Virginia Legislative Black Caucus
1000 Bank Street
Richmond, VA 23219

To Virginia's Elected Leaders:

Earlier this month, Dr. Vanessa Tyson came forward to share her story of sexual assault by Lieutenant Governor Justin Fairfax at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Five people have confirmed to the New York Times that in 2017 and 2018 Dr. Tyson told them that she had been sexually assaulted in 2004 at the Convention and that her description was consistent with the public statement she made this month. Days after Dr. Tyson's statement, Ms. Meredith Watson came forward with a statement that Mr. Fairfax raped her in a "premeditated and aggressive" assault in 2000 when they were both undergraduates at Duke University and that she contemporaneously told several classmates and friends about the assault. At least one classmate has confirmed to journalists that Ms. Watson told her in 2000 that she had been raped by Fairfax, and emails show she made the same statement to others in 2016. Both women have indicated a willingness to testify under oath about their assaults. Yet in the days since Dr. Tyson and Ms. Watson have come forward, many have already demonstrated a willingness to move on and dismiss these credible testimonies without a meaningful accounting. This is all too familiar. Too often, survivors' voices are ignored—especially when women of color speak. Or worse, they tell their stories and are met with shaming, blaming and indifference. Why come forward at all, when nothing important will result.

There is no clear roadmap for addressing these serious allegations against a sitting elected official, and the current political context in Virginia further complicates the path forward. But vague calls for "due process" and empty promises to "look into it," are insufficient responses, as they amount to little more than maneuvers designed to make the public look the other way. Dr. Tyson and Ms. Watson deserve more.

With the law on your side, great things are possible.

Hearing and respecting survivors' voices requires taking their allegations seriously. This means ensuring that the allegations against Mr. Fairfax receive a full, fair, transparent, independent, nonpoliticized investigation, which is what all the parties and all Virginians deserve. We call upon you to appoint an independent, nonpartisan counsel to investigate these matters and make a public reporting of findings and conclusions. Conducting such an investigation means rejecting false deadlines for action such as the close of the Virginia legislative session this week, as demands for justice and accountability cannot be abandoned based on arbitrary deadlines. Nor are secret or sharply cabined inquiries into these matters acceptable. We have moved beyond the day in which our leaders can sweep such serious allegations under the rug and wait for the people to forget. The nation is watching and waiting for Virginia's leaders to pursue justice in this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fatima Goss Graves". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fatima Goss Graves
President & CEO
National Women's Law Center

With the law on your side, great things are possible.

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