



Green Mountain Self-Advocates

[www.gmsavt.org](http://www.gmsavt.org)

House Human Services Testimony April 26, 2023

Hi. I'm Max Barrows. I live in Worcester with my parents. I have been the Outreach director for Green Mountain Self-Advocates for 15 years. I'm a person with an intellectual and developmental disability. I'm on the Autism Spectrum. I get Developmental Services.

Green Mountain Self-Advocates is a disability justice organization run by and for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We started in 1994. Many of our founding members had their freedom taken away and were forced to live for years in Brandon Training School. When they got out of the institution they got involved in self-advocacy. They knew that just because the institution closed, the attitudes that built the institution still existed. Today people with disabilities have rights, but people do not always respect our rights and choices. Our society is set up to make it hard for people with disabilities to use their rights. People with disabilities, as a group, are treated unfairly because of our disabilities. In other words, Ableism is alive and well in 2023. In response to the many ways Ableism impacts our lives, Green Mountain Self-Advocates has peer groups meeting all over Vermont. We support more than 20 local peer support groups with over 600 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities speaking up for ourselves as individuals and as part of these groups.

I'm here to address S. 89. Green Mountain Self-Advocates does not support the building of a forensic facility for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We do not agree with a policy giving DAIL the power to say that I am a danger to my community and lock me up. We ask that the administration and legislature explore other options.

Green Mountain Self-Advocates believes that when decisions are being made about our lives, we need to be there. Not just one time, but every time. Who knows us better than we know ourselves?

We learned that a committee about building a forensic facility has been meeting for a few years. We heard that they **were** not able to reach an agreement. And correct us if we are wrong, but it is our understanding that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities were not on the committee. Going forward, we ask you to include us. Nothing About Us without Us.

One of my advocacy roles is I am a member of the State Program Standing Committee for Developmental Disabilities Services Division. In fact in November 2022, I completed a 2 year role of serving as co-chair of this committee. The plan to build a forensic facility has not been discussed with our committee. S.89 is a significant change in the Developmental Services System of Care Plan and a drastic departure from how people have been served over the past 30 years. It is not appropriate that the State Program Standing Committee has not been actively involved in this decision.

It feels as if this bill is being fast tracked. We are thankful to Representative Theresa Wood for bringing S.89 to our attention.

Many self-advocates are asking why you are doing this now?

Because of the pandemic and the workforce crisis, many of us have been getting by with reduced services

or not having any developmental services. Some reports by agencies say upwards of 40% of services have or still are not being provided.

So now, when people are not getting the help they need to deal with challenging situations, now is when you want to spend money to build a forensic facility?

It seems unfair to put policies in place that could force us to live in an institution when we have not had adequate support to prevent problems from occurring.

Last legislative session and again this year the Vermont House Human Service Committee has been taking testimony about quality assurance issues with developmental services. There have been reports in the news about people with developmental disabilities being abused by their support staff. We need to be investing in improving the quality of developmental services, not creating segregated facilities.

One way that ableism impacts our lives is often, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are held to a higher standard than those **without** disabilities. When we make mistakes, it often leads to harsher consequences. Because many of us experience difficulty communicating, sometimes acting out is the only way we have of commenting on the quality of our lives.

We understand that our **communities** need to be safe. We definitely understand the need for safety since people with intellectual and developmental disabilities experience abuse at higher rates than other groups of people.

But if someone is having a hard time, and they are not getting the help they need and they act out. We do not want one of the options on the table to be to "lock people up."

It's been 30 years since we closed **Brandon** Training School. We should be celebrating that we have made progress and recognizing that we still have work to do to fully include people with disabilities in every aspect of society. This means, put our energy into investing fully inclusive programs, not going back to programs that segregate. Why go back to those days?

My final comments are to remind us of the promise made by Governor Howard Dean when Brandon Training School closed in 1993. Governor Dean said, *"I'm proud to maintain the commitment of the state to the very kind of services that we still owe to the population that was once at Brandon and is now in the community."*

*We will continue to assure that individuals receive support & services;*

*We will continue to assure that those services meet acceptable levels of quality;  
We will continue to assure that persons receiving the services are free from abuse  
and neglect or mistreatment;  
To assure that the folks taking care of the people needing these services have  
adequate training & support.  
So, our commitment does not end with the closing of this institution.  
Our commitment continues.”*