

Hello, my name is Ana Mejia, I reside in Windsor County and represent the VT Every Town Project on the Land Access and Opportunity Board. The Every Town Project seeks to create access to land through alternatives to land ownership for those most impacted by systemic racism and who've been forced off their land and homes for generations. I am here to provide testimony in support of the LAOBs appropriations request.

As a state, we need to resource the work of the LAOB in a sustainable way that allows for future success and independence, so that we can fulfill the equity goals laid out by the state of Vermont. In the past few months, the LAOB has invited housing and economic development agencies to meet with us and submit surveys so that we can learn about their programs and how they integrate equity into those programs. This includes the VT Dept of Housing, VT Housing & Conservation Board, VT Housing & Finance Agency, VT Economic Development Authority, VT Agricultural Credit Corp and more. One key takeaway from these surveys and meetings, is that the majority of these agencies have not taken intentional steps to promote equal access to their programs or even track how equitable they've been in distributing program assistance. Some are even oblivious to the barriers in access that marginalized communities face, which is a natural result when an agency lacks staff representation of those with marginalized identities, makes no effort to solicit feedback from those communities, or designate staff/resources to investigate the disparity in access to these resources. This is where the LAOB, among all existing state funded housing/land agencies, is uniquely positioned to fill that critical gap. The LAOB is well positioned to investigate where state programs and investments are falling short of the state's equity goals and recommend how we can make different and targeted investments in those communities who have been deprived of the opportunity to reap the benefits of existing programs/investments. This year the LAOB will lead a statewide equity assessment to build off on the data we've already begun to compile and measure program's impact on housing/land access. The results of this assessment will inform the LAOB own grantmaking programs, AND provide critical insights and recommendations to the full spectrum of organizations who play a role in the state's housing and land enterprise sector. **Please support the Land Access and Opportunity Board with an appropriation of \$1.97 million in FY25 to support our baseline operational expenses and allow us to continue our very critical work.**