

Redefining the *Citizen Legislature*:



The challenge of representative diversity, its benefits, and what we can do to better reflect the needs and experiences of all Vermonters

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Report Purpose, Context, and Additional Background	2
I.A. Report Purpose	2
I.B. What is a “Citizen Legislature”?	2
I.C. Lack of Representation in the Legislature	4
I.C.1. BIPOC Representation	5
I.C.2. Still No Gender Parity	6
I.C.3. Diversity in Age	7
I.D. Why Representation Matters	8
Barriers to the Legislature	10
II. Survey Overview	10
II.A. Legislative Compensation	10
II.B. Healthcare Benefits	11
II.C. Parenting in Public Office	12
II.C.1. Child Care Access	12
II.C.2. Scheduling	13
II.C.3. Lactation Room Access	14
II.C.5. Campaign Funding Allocations	15
II.D. Racial and Gender Bias and Harassment	16
II.D.1. Racism in Public Office	16
II.D.2. Sexism in Pubic Office	18
Policy Recommendations	18
III.A. Increase Legislative Compensation	18
III.B. Extend Healthcare Benefits	21
III.C. Parenting in Public Office	21
III.C.1 Increase Child Care Access	21
III.C.2. Align Scheduling	21
III.C.3. Improve Lactation Room Options	22
III.D. Combating Racial and Gender Bias and Harassment	23
Conclusion	24
Appendices	24
Acknowledgements	24
Survey Methods	25
Survey Results	25
Other State Policies	33
Spotlight on Organizations in Vermont Dedicated to Diversifying Public Office	33
The Bright Leadership Institute	33
Emerge Vermont	34

Executive Summary

Vermont's state legislature - its structure and pay - make legislative service out of reach for many Vermonters. Why? There are a number of major barriers, as identified through literature reviews, interviews with legislators and advocates around the state, and a survey detailing the experiences of Vermonters who have run for or served in public office. This report discusses those barriers and presents multiple recommendations that can increase accessibility to the state legislature for underrepresented Vermonters.

Some of the key barriers to serving in the Vermont State Legislature were found through interviews, surveys, and research. First, the part-time nature of the session means that legislative compensation does not equate to a full-time job, making it difficult for those who are not retired or have another source of stable income to serve. Serving as a legislator does not come with healthcare benefits, creating another barrier for those not covered by Medicare or a partner's health insurance plan. There are also many barriers to serving with young children, including scheduling conflicts with meetings and school breaks, long commutes to Montpelier, and difficulties with pumping breast milk while in the state house. BIPOC Vermonters face additional barriers to serving in public office, as many leaders of color in the state have been met with harassment and threats to their safety while serving.¹

To address these obstacles, various recommendations were proposed. One way to make serving in the Vermont legislature more feasible for all Vermonters is to provide compensation for legislative work outside the session. The state should also provide support for legislators to cover health insurance to ensure those who are not already covered can comfortably serve. To address the barriers to serving with young children, the state could provide an on-site child care facility or a needs-based stipend for child care elsewhere. The state could also align the week off for the General Assembly with Vermont public school's February break to create a schedule that further supports parent legislators. The legislature should continue to offer telework options to cut down on commute times and allow for greater flexibility. Lastly, to combat threats and harassment that disproportionately impact BIPOC Vermonters, the legislature should enact stronger policies to support victims of hate speech and hold aggressors accountable for their actions. Strengthening these policies is a far leap from addressing structural racism in Vermont, but it is a first step of many in providing a better way to support leaders of color in Vermont.

Although this report is not a comprehensive list of the barriers to serving in the Vermont Legislature, it provides an opportunity to continue conversations around how Vermont can make serving in public office easier for all Vermonters, especially those who have historically been left out of decision-making processes. Breaking down these barriers to serving can create a more representative legislature, one where Vermonters can draw on their lived experiences to create policy solutions that work for their communities.

¹ BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

I. Report Purpose, Context, and Additional Background

I.A. Report Purpose

The idea for this report occurred by happenstance. In fall 2020, several new legislators, all identifying as female but otherwise representing different ages, socio-economic brackets, and stages in life, were participating in a series of training sessions for incoming legislators. As the training continued, legislators began asking one another questions including, “How are you juggling everything?”, “Do you notice how little representation there is of “fill-in-the-blank,” “Why, when I state something, is it being restated by a white male literally verbatim? Did no one hear me?” and so on. From these questions arose the impetus for this report.

This report covers Vermont policy and governance structure, compares it to other states, and provides recommendations to increase diversity in the political realm. The author began by surveying and interviewing several people, including members from the National Conference of State Legislatures, staff from Women in Government (WIG), and the Vermont General Assembly.

The remainder of the report is as follows: Section I discusses the Vermont State Legislature compared to other states, demographics of the state and members of the General Assembly, and the importance of having a diverse state government, Section II examines the barriers to serving in the legislature, and Section III proposes recommendations to address these barriers.

***individual comments made to the author were made anonymous...

I.B. What is a “Citizen Legislature”?

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), state legislatures are divided into three categories; Green (full-time, well-paid, large staff), Gray (hybrid), and Gold (part-time, low pay, small staff), with the Vermont State Legislature considered a part-time or “citizen” legislature.² The concept of a citizen legislature in which “members take time away from their primary jobs/careers and serve out of a sense of civic responsibility” continues to be a source of pride in Vermont, according to a report by the Snelling Center for Government.³ However, the citizen legislature should not be taken for granted. The report warned that “in order to continue this tradition of a citizen’s legislature, we must ensure that “Vermonters from all walks of life are able to participate in this aspect of our democratic process. Reasonable pay and benefits are necessary to maintain diverse representation among our legislators.”

Vermont is one of fourteen gold legislatures, including Maine, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. On average, Gold legislatures spend the equivalent of half of a full-time job doing

² [Full- and Part-Time Legislatures \(ncsl.org\)](https://www.ncsl.org/research/state-legislatures/full-and-part-time-legislatures.aspx)

³ [Compensating Government Officials in Vermont: A Report to the Legislature](https://www.ncsl.org/research/state-legislatures/compensating-government-officials-in-vermont-a-report-to-the-legislature.aspx)

legislative work. They are typically found in smaller, more rural states, and are considered more traditional than Green and Gray legislatures. The average annual compensation for Gold legislatures is \$18,449, which includes salary, per diem, and any other unvouchered expense payments, putting Vermont below average compensation levels at just over \$13,000 per year.⁴

Footnote:

- Assume 4 nights in a hotel
- Take out recess week
- Go through mid-May
- Average mileage: up to 100 miles (or exclude mileage)
- About 118 days

State	Base Salary	Average Number of Weeks in Session ⁵	Mileage (cents per mile)	Per Diem
Maine	\$14,862 for the first regular session. \$10,582 for the second regular session.	24	44/mile.	\$38/day for lodging (or mileage and tolls up to \$38/day in lieu of lodging). \$32/day for meals. <i>Set by statute.</i>
New Hampshire	\$100/year	24	57.5/mile.	No per diem is paid.
Rhode Island	\$15,959/year	25	57.7/mile.	No per diem is paid.
Vermont	\$13,372.56/year (\$742.92/week during session)	18	57.5/mile. Tied to the federal rate.	\$132/day for lodging. \$66/day for meals.

Figure 1. Data from the NCSL on 2020 Legislature Compensation.⁶ States included are categorized as Gold Legislatures.⁷

⁴ [Full- and Part-Time Legislatures \(ncsl.org\)](https://www.ncsl.org/legislative-process/full-and-part-time-legislatures)

⁵ Average session lengths from 2021 to 2016, excluding 2020 due to the unusual session lengths during the pandemic. Data from NCSL - [2021 State Legislative Session Calendar ncsl.org](https://www.ncsl.org/legislative-process/2021-state-legislative-session-calendar)

⁶ [2020 Legislator Compensation](https://www.ncsl.org/legislative-process/2020-legislator-compensation)

⁷ [Full- and Part-Time Legislatures \(ncsl.org\)](https://www.ncsl.org/legislative-process/full-and-part-time-legislatures)

I.C. Lack of Representation in the Legislature

Since 2015, NCSL's legislature demographics show more women and people from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds making up today's average legislature.⁸ However, these numbers are increasing slowly, and state legislatures are still less diverse than the country's population as a whole.⁹

- The New American Leaders Project (NALP), a nonpartisan group that advocates for more first- and second-generation immigrants in politics, came out with a report in 2016 revealing this gap in representation.¹⁰ The NALP report found that the two largest immigrant groups, Latinos and Asian Americans, made up 20 percent of the U.S. population but only 6 percent of all state legislators in 2016.
- A similar phenomenon is found for Black women in state legislatures. A study from State Innovation Exchange, a group that advocates for representation in state legislatures, and the National Organization for Black Elected Legislative Women found that Black women fill just 5 percent of the 7,383 state legislature seats across the United States,¹¹ despite accounting for 13 percent of the U.S. population.¹²
- Overall, women in the U.S. have reached a historical record for representation following the 2020 election, yet are still underrepresented. Women make up 50.8 percent of the country's population and account for only 30.6 percent of state legislatures.¹³
- Nationwide, lawmakers skew older than the country's population. The average age of all state legislators is 56, compared with 47 for the adult U.S. population.¹⁴ More specifically, legislators from the baby-boomer generation have a disproportionate influence in America's legislatures, with nearly twice as many members as their overall share of the U.S. population.¹⁵ In contrast, millennials, born 1981-1997, are underrepresented.

When comparing Vermont demographics to the state legislature, similar patterns seen at the federal level are found, including gaps in representation for race, gender, and age.

Until state legislatures are more diverse, Congress too will lack diversity.

⁸ [Who's the 'Average' State Legislator? Depends on Your State](#)

⁹ [Who's the 'Average' State Legislator? Depends on Your State](#)

¹⁰ [States of Inclusion - The New American Leaders Project](#)

¹¹ [No Democracy Without Black Women](#)

¹² [Women of Color in the United States: Quick Take](#)

¹³ [Women in State Legislatures for 2021](#)

¹⁴ [Who We Elect: The Demographics of State Legislatures](#)

¹⁵ [Who We Elect: The Demographics of State Legislatures](#)

The political pipeline for minorities is slim

Percent of population that is a minority in:

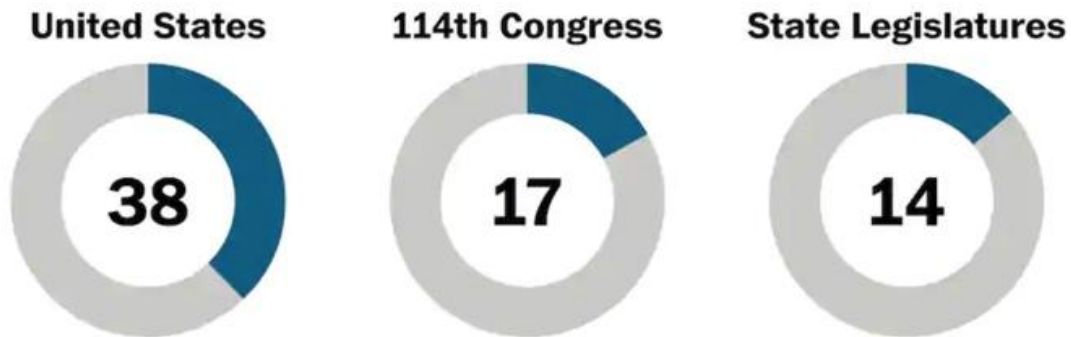


Figure 4. Source: Pew Research Center, Congress.gov, and the New American Leadership Project.¹⁶

I.C.1. BIPOC Representation

BIPOC Vermonters are underrepresented in the state legislature. According to the United States Census, Vermont is predominantly white, with non-white Vermonters making up about 6 percent of the state, as illustrated in Figure ___ below.¹⁷ This 6 percent is further differentiated accordingly: 1.4 percent of Vermonters are Black or African American, 2 percent are Hispanic or Latino, 1.9 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.4 percent are Native American, and 2 percent of Vermonters are multiracial.

In 2020, the makeup of the State Legislature was 98 percent white which is 4 percent higher than the state percentage, according to the National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL).¹⁸ Black Vermonters make up only 1 percent of the General Assembly, Hispanic and Latino account for 1 percent, Asian and Pacific Islander make up 0 percent, Native Americans make up 1 percent, and 0 percent identify as multiracial.¹⁹

¹⁶ [The striking lack of diversity in state legislatures](#)

¹⁷ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/VT>

¹⁸ [State Legislator Demographics](#)

¹⁹ [State Legislator Demographics](#)

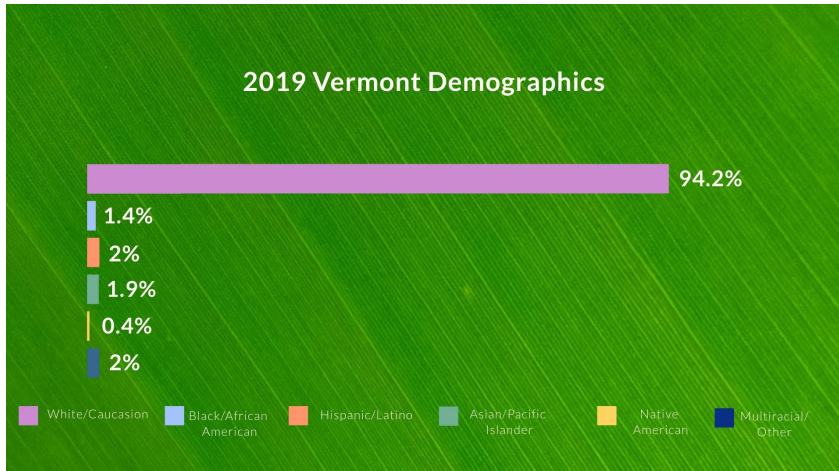


Figure 5. Data from U.S. Census Bureau.²⁰



Figure 6. Data from NCSL.²¹

I.C.2. Still No Gender Parity

In addition to disproportionate representation in race, the state house also lacks gender parity. While males and females in Vermont account for an almost equal divide, females in the legislature represent only 40 percent of the General Assembly, with males representing 60 percent.²² In a report published in 2017 by Change the Story Vermont,, they found that “progress [in Vermont] in achieving gender parity in leadership has been uneven, slow-going, or in some cases nonexistent.”²³ According to the report, although women’s share of legislator seats more than doubled between 1983 and 1993 --from 17 percent to 35 percent -- they

²⁰ [US Census Bureau QuickFacts: Vermont](#)

²¹ [State Legislator Demographics](#)

²² Data did not account for non-binary or gender queer folks.

²³ [Vermont Women and Leadership - Change the Story VT](#)

leveled off after 1993. Even almost 30 years later, that number has only increased by 4.5 percent.²⁴

% Women in VT General Assembly, House of Representatives & Senate, 1981-2017

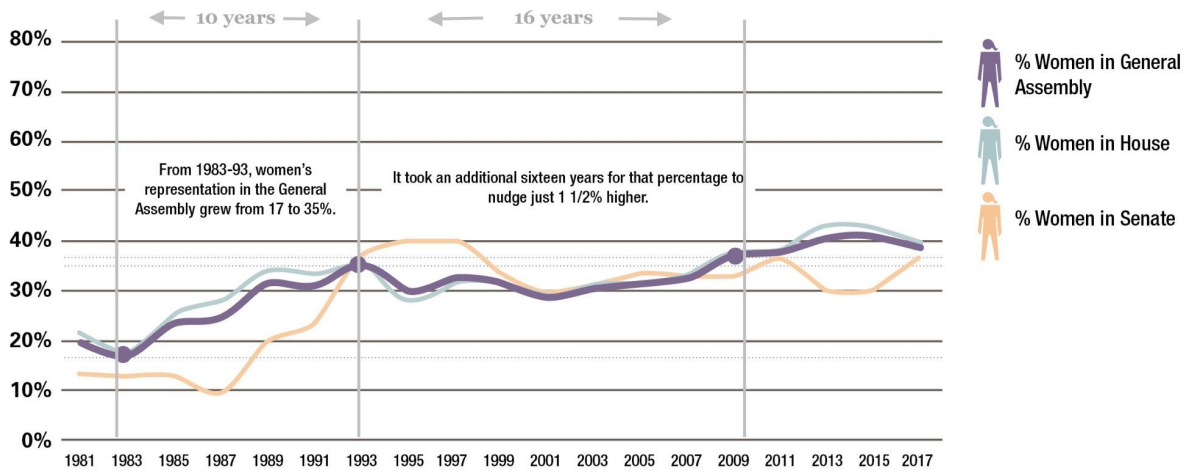


Figure 7. Source: Change the Story 2017 Status Report: Vermont Women and Leadership

Vermont Women in Public Life, Vermont Commission on Women, 2013 and 2015.²⁵ 2017 data from the NCSL.²⁶

I.C.3. Diversity in Age

Older Vermonters account for a higher percentage of the legislature than the state population, similar to national trends. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median age of the Vermont population is 42.7 years old, yet the median age of representatives and senators in 2017 was 63 and 65 respectively.²⁷ Data also shows that many legislators are retired. When a rule passed in Vermont calling on representatives to disclose their sources of income, "of the reps who turned in their forms, which was almost everyone, nearly 40 percent said they were retired or had no other meaningful source of income outside their legislative pay."²⁸ In Vermont, 20 percent of people are 65 and older.²⁹ Since 65 is the average retirement age in Vermont, this

²⁴ [State Legislator Demographics](#)

²⁵ [Vermont Women and Leadership - Change the Story VT](#)

²⁶ [Women in State Legislatures for 2017](#)

²⁷ [Low Pay, Weird Schedule: Who Exactly Can Pull Off The Legislator Lifestyle?](#)

²⁸ [Low Pay, Weird Schedule: Who Exactly Can Pull Off The Legislator Lifestyle?](#)

²⁹ [Vermont - US Census Bureau QuickFacts](#)

shows that about double the percentage of retired Vermonters serve in the legislature when compared to the state average.³⁰

I.D. Why Representation Matters

“Representation matters. Those who serve Vermont must understand—not just intellectually, but on a deep and personal level—the hardships inherent in Vermont life. These include costs and availability of child-care, the lack of healthcare benefits and family leave, low wages, scarcity of affordable housing, limited public transportation and the systemic barriers to achieving a financially secure, safe and well-balanced life. These are the life experiences that Legislators should draw from when competing demands for funds and interests are at stake.”

-Report of the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force
(2021)

Across fields, research has demonstrated that diverse and inclusive spaces create better outcomes. In a study by McKinsey and Company, an American management consulting firm, the trajectories for more than 1,000 companies in 15 countries were tracked to collect data on diversity levels and performance.³¹ Corporate leadership with greater gender, cultural, and ethnic diversity in the top quartile were found to financially outperform less diverse companies by 36 percent. Diverse and inclusive workplaces create benefits far beyond financial performance. Research by Catalyst, a global nonprofit that helps companies build inclusive workplaces, found that diverse and inclusive organizations have higher recruiting and retention rates.³² Women are more likely, for example, to be interested in a company with a higher percentage of female leadership. Companies with inclusive business cultures and policies also saw an increase in creativity, innovation, openness, and better assessment of consumer interest demand.³³

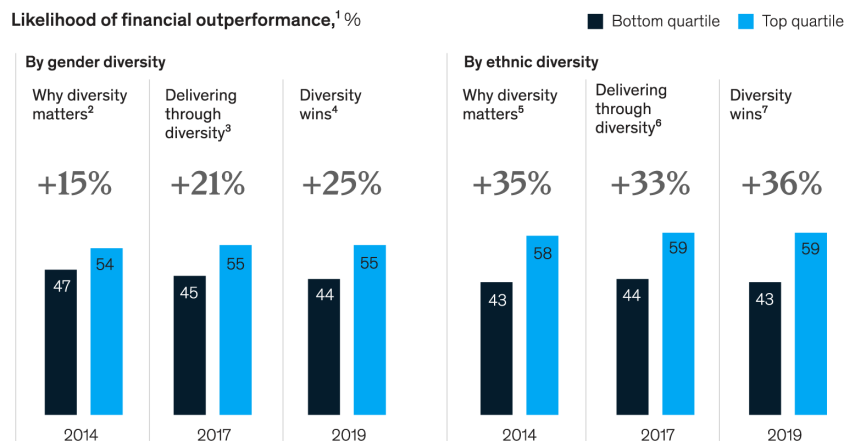
³⁰ [Here's the Average Retirement Age in Your State - Money Talks News](#)

³¹ [Diversity wins: How inclusion matters](#)

³² [Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter: Quick Take - Catalyst](#)

³³ [Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter: Quick Take - Catalyst](#)

The business case for diversity in executive teams remains strong.



¹Likelihood of financial outperformance vs the national industry median; p-value <0.05, except 2014 data where p-value <0.1. ²n = 383; Latin America, UK, and US; earnings before interest and taxes (EBIT) margin 2010–13. ³n = 991; Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, UK, and US; EBIT margin 2011–15. ⁴n = 1,039; 2017 companies for which gender data available in 2019, plus Denmark, Norway, and Sweden; EBIT margin 2014–18. ⁵n = 364; Latin America, UK, and US; EBIT margin 2010–13. ⁶n = 589; Brazil, Mexico, Singapore, South Africa, UK, and US; EBIT margin 2011–15. ⁷n = 533; Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, UK, and US, where ethnicity data available in 2019; EBIT margin 2014–18. Source: Diversity Wins data set

McKinsey & Company

Figure _____. Source: McKinsey & Company

Catalyst also found that diverse teams lead to a greater variety of perspectives and are more likely to consider information more thoroughly and accurately by avoiding groupthink. Gender-diverse boards have been found to adopt more progressive organizational management practices like work-life support programs that increase employee satisfaction, as women are more likely than men to identify social issues such as human rights and income inequality. These qualities can be beneficial in government as well, as the need to avoid groupthink and identify social inequities is crucial to responsible governance.

The decisions made on the House Floor and in committee meetings directly impact the lives of all Vermonters. When leadership is representative of the population as a whole, policies reflect the lived experiences of communities across the state.

Diversity is just as important in government as in business. In fact, the disproportionately low rate of BIPOC legislators has detrimental effects for the state. BIPOC Vermonters are deeply and personally impacted by many of the bills that “never get passed or do become law but fail to live up to their promises because of compromises made in committees and on the floor.”³⁴ These same Vermonters can bring community-based reforms to the table because they understand the hardships of living in Vermont and the solutions that will work for their communities. When these voices are missing from the table, their lived experiences are not prioritized in decision-making processes that directly affect underrepresented communities. Worse still, the 2021 Report of the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force noted that without proportionate representation, “people in local leadership positions remain unaware of their

³⁴ [Report of the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force](#)

biases or shortcomings, and perpetuate a system wherein marginalized voices are further excluded from community affairs.”³⁵ These findings suggest that the absence of leaders of color in the legislature results in maintaining the status quo for Vermont's communities of color. Thus, increasing representation for Vermonters of color can create beneficial change for historically underrepresented communities. The Racial Equity Task Force Report wrote “studies show that women-identified legislators are more likely to introduce bills that advance the needs of women and Black legislators are more likely to introduce bills that advance the needs of the Black community.”³⁶ Black and Latina women legislators are also more likely to meet the needs of multiple disadvantaged communities, as they are often the ones to sponsor bills that protect and advantage women of color. These voices are essential to shaping legislation that will have the best impact on marginalized communities in Vermont.

II. Barriers to the Legislature

II. Survey Overview

“As a legislative body, we need to decide if we want to continue to do things the way we always have, and therefore get the few types of people who have the time and can afford to run for office, or if we wish to become a more diverse body.” -survey respondent

II.A. Legislative Compensation

“As all persons of full age, to preserve their independence (if without a sufficient estate) ought to have some profession, calling, trade, or farm, whereby they may honestly subsist, there can be no necessity for, nor use in, establishing offices of profit...But if any person is called into public service to the prejudice of that person's private affairs, the person has a right to a reasonable compensation.”³⁷

-Section 61 of the Constitution of the State of Vermont

For many working Vermonters, the lack of reasonable compensation is one of the key obstacles to serving in the State House. Vermont legislators are paid \$742.92 a week during the three and a half month long session.³⁸ Legislators also receive \$132 per day for lodging and \$66 per day for meals while in session. For travel reimbursement, legislators are allotted 57.5 cents per mile which is tied to the federal rate.³⁹ Although weekly compensation is adjusted annually

³⁵ [Report of the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force](#)

³⁶ [Report of the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force](#)

³⁷ [Constitution of the State of Vermont | Vermont General Assembly](#)

³⁸ [2020 Legislator Compensation](#)

³⁹ [2020 Legislator Compensation](#)

by the cost of living adjustment, it is often still not enough to support working Vermonters and their families.

Numerous survey respondents noted the lack of compensation as something that stands in the way for them running for public office. When asked “Select all options that would have allowed you to run for public office sooner,” 22 percent of respondents mentioned higher pay as allowing them to run for office sooner or at all. One survey respondent wrote that “You have to be financially comfortable to serve in public office, which is a huge flaw of the system.” Another added, “I won’t run for the House because I am the primary income earner for my household and I can’t afford to give up my job to serve.” Serving in the Legislature was called a “net loser financially” by another respondent.

In addition to low compensation levels, legislators provide unpaid labor during and out of session. This can include work with constituents, caucus meetings outside of the legislative hours, researching subject issue areas, and reading bills in advance of committee. Other work outside of set legislative hours include meeting with targeted working groups and preparing to lay the groundwork for future bills to move through the legislative process. These tasks take up a great deal of time and energy. A survey conducted by the Snelling Center for Government in 2004 found that on average, the legislators who responded spent 15 to 20 hours per week on legislative work outside of the session. Despite many unpaid hours of work, our current system does not acknowledge the full service provided by these legislators even today. One respondent who filled out the BPO survey wrote “We work for too little pay and provide a lot of free labor. If this was improved, more people that aren’t retired or independently wealthy could run and our legislature would be more representative.”

“If we truly want a citizens legislature that allows any and all Vermonters to serve, we must look at increased pay for legislators, including pay during the months that members are not in the State House. Work as a legislator extends outside of the dates that we are “in session.” This work has value and pay should reflect that.” -Survey Respondent

II.B. Healthcare Benefits

The absence of healthcare benefits is yet another barrier to serving in the State House. A 2004 survey sent to the General Assembly by the Snelling Center, mentioned earlier, found that most members have full health benefits covered during the legislative session, but there are about “25 percent that either have no health benefits, whose employers discontinue coverage during the session, or who are self-employed and carry their own benefits at full cost during the session.”⁴⁰ In the BPO survey, 43.7 percent selected “health care provided by the legislature” as an option that would have allowed them to run for office sooner, or at all if they have not yet run. Although many legislators in the General Assembly qualify for Medicare, younger, working-class legislators are left to find health care coverage, with no support from the state. One survey respondent wrote that “the prospect of not having good healthcare is a non-starter for me,” while another added that “the lack of health insurance benefits” is a significant barrier for people running for the Vermont State Legislature.

⁴⁰ [Compensating Government Officials in Vermont: A Report to the Legislature](#)

II.C. Parenting in Public Office

While low compensation and lack of benefits create obstacles for Vermonters across the state, some aspects of the legislature are particularly challenging for those with young children. Some of these barriers include inaccessible child care, conflicts with scheduling, challenges with breastfeeding during session, and being questioned

II.C.1. Child Care Access

Child care is often inaccessible for many Vermonters. According to a Center for American Progress Report released in 2017, one half of all Americans and 37 percent of Vermonters live in child care deserts.⁴¹ Child care deserts are defined as a census tract with more than 50 children under the age of 5 years old that has no child care provider or so few there are three times as many children as there are daycare slots.⁴² Vermont placed 18th out of 22 states evaluated for child care accessibility.

The number of families with both parents in the workforce has increased in Vermont as well. More than 70 percent of Vermont children under 6 years old have two working parents and almost 47 percent of children who need care do not have access to it.⁴³ In addition to the inaccessibility of child care in Vermont, women often reduce their hours, move to a more flexible schedule, or leave the labor force entirely because they simply cannot access child care.⁴⁴ Women have also told Let's Grow Kids that they turn down promotions and pay increases to be able to keep benefits that allow them to afford child care.

"It doesn't matter what county you look at, we have real challenges for families who are trying to find high quality affordable child care or any regulated child care here in this state,"

-Robyn Freedner-Maguire, former campaign director of Let's Grow Kids, an advocacy organization focused on improving child care in Vermont and making it more affordable.

These barriers portray a clear need for improving the accessibility of child care in the state of Vermont. For legislators with young children in particular, there is a great need for increased access to child care providers. The BPO survey responses confirm the challenges and needs associated with child care. When asked to "Select all options that would have allowed you to run for public office sooner (or would allow you to run at all if you haven't yet)," 18.9 percent of survey respondents selected "on-site access to child care," and 21.6 percent selected "more flexible work hours and understanding of child care needs." This is particularly striking given that nearly one-third of survey respondents self-selected as "retired", which could be inferred as being past the child rearing age.

⁴¹ [Mapping America's Child Care Deserts](#)

⁴² [Mapping America's Child Care Deserts](#)

⁴³ [Report: 40 percent of Vermonters live in child care 'deserts'](#)

⁴⁴ In a survey of U.S. adults ages 25-54 who are currently unemployed, of women who identify as homemakers and have not looked for employment in the last year, almost 75% said they would consider going back to work if a job offered flexible hours or allowed them to work from home.

One survey respondent wrote “I am 49-years-old. I am a working Vermonter with school age children and elderly parents. I feel that my perspective is useful in the legislature. But I also feel that our current system does not make it easy for people in my position to be able to serve.”

II.C.2. Scheduling

The unpredictable schedule creates an additional barrier for working Vermonters, especially working parents, to serve in the public office.⁴⁵ When asked “is there anything else you would like to add” in the BPO survey, one legislator wrote that “serving as a person with two young children is incredibly challenging.” The weekday schedule expands into early morning meetings, late night presentations and weekend events, which further augments the need for child care. The timing of caucus and committee meetings also makes it difficult to balance child care responsibilities. The survey respondent quoted above added “Meetings [are] held at pick up and drop off times, [and there is a] lack of awareness of the disproportionate cost that this creates for parents who have to seek increased childcare.”

“As a mother or father of young children I would have found it very difficult to meet my obligations as a parent and a Legislator. I would have been able to serve if there had been safe and accessible child care either available with extended hours on site that included a stipend that covered the costs for any extended childcare hours or that covered in home childcare in the event of extended hours in the Legislature.” -survey respondent

Not only does the legislative schedule make it difficult for parents of young children to serve, but even the legislative recess in March does not align with many of Vermont’s public schools’ February breaks.⁴⁶ This increases the challenges of finding child care during the week off in February and makes it more difficult for legislators to find time to spend with their families. Due to this misalignment, family vacations either do not occur or children end up missing a week of school in March to attend. This could also mean that the legislative parent(s) simply can not join the family vacation in February. For legislators who serve several bienniums, the end result of these incongruent breaks is, essentially, missing out on “memory making” opportunities with ones children.

“While I love my work as a legislator and get immense satisfaction from serving, I am also cognizant that because of the lower pay I need to accept to do this work, my wife and I are

⁴⁵ Schedule uncertainty causes challenges not just for parents, but for those with additional employment. One survey respondent stated that “the last day of session is always uncertain which makes it difficult to provide a clear start and end date for an additional job which makes legislators seem unreliable to their employers, when in reality it is out of their control.”

⁴⁶ The legislative break includes Town Meeting Day.

less able to help our children with college expenses than we would like. I also feel like I am cheating my youngest child as we can afford fewer vacations and similar quality of life activities for her.” -survey respondent

Before the pandemic, when the Legislature met in person, commuting to Montpelier could be a challenge as well, especially for legislators with young children. One survey respondent wrote “It is very hard to serve from southern Vermont if you have a family. I was in the legislature years ago, but had to leave because we had a child and my wife was working full-time. I simply could not be gone from home three or four nights a week.” The same respondent continued, writing “I was able to run again after [my] children [left] the house and I am retired from full-time work.” Another respondent wrote that “it would have been a struggle to serve when I had young children.” This challenge was “due to uncertainty about having to accommodate my personal schedule to the inherently uncertain and constantly changing Legislative/ Committee responsibilities, having to be in Montpelier 4 days of the week for 5 months of the year (unless I chose to commute) and having to spend a majority of my ‘free time’ communicating with constituents, reading proposed bills, and expert’s testimonies.”

“Being in the minority as a younger, working legislator, means there isn’t a lot of awareness and a lack of discussion that the current schedule doesn’t work for everyone.”

-Survey Respondent

II.C.3. Lactation Room Access

Survey respondents and various reports indicate that being a mother while serving in office presents additional, specific challenges. Identified issues include challenges associated with breastfeeding, inappropriate behavior regarding pregnant bodies, and the questioning of one’s abilities while being a mother in public office.

For example, breastfeeding accessibility creates an additional roadblock for legislators who are breastfeeding. In a conversation with one representative, she explained the challenges she faced while using the lactation room in the State House. First, the room is difficult to locate. There are no clear signs to the one small room dedicated to pumping breast milk, so new legislators and others who use the building are forced to “ask around” to find the room. The lactation room is small and cramped with no windows, making it an uncomfortable atmosphere for an already stigmatized experience. In the same conversation, the representative added that the room has no internal lock, “meaning if you are in there, you can’t lock the door and someone else can open the room with a key on the outside while the room is occupied.” This eliminates any sense of privacy one may want when finding somewhere to pump. To make matters worse, there are large pipes overhead and a sewer drain where water can be heard running through them when a toilet is flushed.



Figure _____. Lactation Room in the Vermont State House. Photos taken by a representative and the Sergeant of Arms.

When one finally does find the room and can get over the sewer drain and cramped quarters, they are still left to deal with finding time during the busy day in session to pump. With short breaks between meetings and an increasingly unpredictable schedule as the session nears adjournment, it can be difficult to find the time without missing important information in a caucus or committee meeting.⁴⁷ Although there is a sink for washing pump parts, there is no place to store breast milk. One representative said that the absence of storage forced her to “lug around [her] milk, pump, and ice packs all day while working in the Statehouse last January 2020.”

II.C.4. Campaign Funding Allocations

Running a campaign takes an immense amount of time and effort, including talking with voters, knocking on doors, and fundraising. Since women spend almost twice as much time as men attending to their children’s needs, according to the Pew Research Center, it makes the case for increased child care needs while campaigning for office.⁴⁸ In fact, 20 percent of 2021 BPO survey respondents selected “if campaign expenses included child care” as something that would have allowed them to run sooner, or at all. In 2019, several states have introduced legislation to approve the use of campaign funds for child care, including California, Illinois and Rhode Island. In some states, such as Connecticut, Kansas, and Texas, candidates often

⁴⁷ Pumping infrequently and irregularly often results in a decrease in milk production, potentially resulting in a mother having to shift to formula sooner than planned/preferred.

⁴⁸ [Child Care and the Future of Campaign Funds](#)

must seek approval for spending campaign funds on child care expenses on a case-by-case basis.⁴⁹

Due to the challenges of running for public office with young children, the passage of H.10 in 2021, a bill relating to permitted candidate expenditures, is something the Vermont Legislature should be proud of.⁵⁰ H.10 clarifies that “expenditures may include those expenses that are necessary to allow a candidate to campaign, such as expenses for the care of a dependent family member that are incurred as a direct result of campaign activity.” This should make running for public office more accessible for parents, particularly women, with young children. “The perspectives of parents with young kids is lost when debating child care, and as it is, the legislative structure is losing a valuable knowledge base,” said a representative in an interview. She added that “We should be asking ‘How can we regularly support legislators with young kids to ensure their participation in these important conversations?’” H.10 is one way that should help to increase the participation of this demographic.

II.D. Racial and Gender Bias and Harassment

II.D.1. Racism in Public Office

*Trigger Warning: Mention of threatening language and harassment.

In addition to the obstacles mentioned earlier, BIPOC Vermonters face further challenges in public office. Countless leaders of color in Vermont, particularly women of color, have faced threats and harassment while campaigning for and serving in public office. Not only do leaders of color face a disproportionate amount of harassment, but many of their harassers are not held accountable. This section presents the experiences of three leaders in Vermont; Kiah Morris, Tabitha Moore, and Alicia Barrows.

Kiah Morris, former Vermont State Representative for Bennington County, is one of the many women of color who have faced violent threats and harassment while serving in public office. After serving in the Legislature for four years as the only African American woman lawmaker in the State House, Morris stepped down in 2018 due to online racial comments and threats to her safety.⁵¹ Following her win in the Democratic primary for reelection to the Statehouse in 2016, white supremacists began harassing Morris. In court, Morris testified that tweets she received made her “fear not just for her safety, but for the safety of her family as well.” “This isn’t typical political banter, this is very hate-directed and very specific and intended to intimidate,” Morris told the judge. Although many state officials and lawmakers agree that something needs to be done to protect Vermonters of color from the abuse that pushed Morris out of office, little has changed in her district or in Vermont, with no legislation passed addressing these issues of safety for leaders of color. Morris said that the increased attention to “what did and didn’t happen to her, and whether there’s more officials could have done, has prevented anyone from taking concrete steps to address the underlying issues.”

⁴⁹ [Child Care and the Future of Campaign Funds](#)

⁵⁰ [An Act Relating to Permitted Candidate Expenditures](#)

⁵¹ [How the Kiah Morris case gripped Vermont, but hasn't changed anything](#)

This problem spans far beyond the legislature. Tabitha Moore, former director of the Rutland County chapter of the NAACP, decided to leave Wallingford, where she grew up and moved back to in 2009, due to racially motivated harassment that targeted her and her family.⁵² “Since June, a number of nonspecific threats and different incidents have been growing,” said Moore. Among the incidents included vandalism of a wooden pallet that Moore had painted with the words “Black Lives Matter.” Moore’s neighbor offered to display the sign on their lawn, but near the end of August 2020 it was covered with white paint. “The tipping point for me, though, was watching what our community did when my daughter was successful,” said Moore. When her daughter convinced the School Board at Mill River High School to fly the BLM flag, she was harassed by people on social media. These incidents led Moore to move her family out of the place she loved.

Alicia Barrows is another woman of color who experienced threats and harassment while serving in a three-year term on the Hartford Selectboard in 2020. Since she began her term on the board, she has been a victim of racial slurs and death threats over the phone, in person, and through email.⁵³ People have called her a “Black supremacist” and told her to “go back to Africa”. In another instance, a man threatened to “curb stomp” her over email and told her to leave the state. Although this incident was reported to the police, no charges were filed. “My life has been threatened and my children have been adversely affected by it,” said Barrows, who was one of three Black selectboard members. In a letter she shared with Valley News, Barrows wrote that “though I no longer feel safe nor welcome in a place I have called home for 15 years, I still care very much for the community and its right to exercise the democratic process.”

These three leaders of color are just a few of many to face threats and harassment due to their positions in public office. Not only do people of color have to deal with these threats to their safety, but they also face heightened scrutiny from the public and fellow public officials. In January of 2020, the Council on Communities of Color under the Council of State Governments met to examine “how race influences the work of elected officials of color in the statehouse — and how their experiences diverge from those of their white colleagues.”⁵⁴ Morris, one of the leaders at the meeting, said that as a leader of color, “to be taken seriously, you have to be aware of the rules of decorum and you have to ascribe to the politeness protocol.”⁵⁵ BIPOC legislators have to be cognizant of what they wear, their tone of voice, and what they say in interrogations on the State House floor. In the same meeting, Rhode Island State Representative Raymond Hull said that one of the biggest struggles of his colleagues of color “is ensuring that they are allowed to express their views openly in the statehouse.” “These are dynamics that silence good legislators of color and stymie equal access to power in legislatures,” said Morris.

Call out box: “BIPOC & LGBTQ Vermonters carry significantly a higher emotional burden when running for office due to the real threat of violence to themselves and their families. Increased awareness about the disproportionate violence and obstacles that marginalized Vermonters face is essential.” -Survey Respondent

⁵² [Rutland NAACP leader leaves home following harassment | News | rutlandherald.com](#)

⁵³ [Black woman quits Vermont town board; cites bigotry, safety](#)

⁵⁴ [Confronting issues around race, and racism, in the statehouse - CSG ERC](#)

⁵⁵ [CSG East Council on Communities of Color meeting 2019](#)

II.D.2. Sexism in Public Office

Female lawmakers with young children also face increased scrutiny while in office. One survey respondent wrote that for pregnant officials, “there is an added lack of physical boundaries, as well as unsolicited comments made about pregnant bodies.” This can create an uncomfortable and even hostile working environment. When survey respondents were asked “have you experienced hostility directed at you in relation to your interest in public office,” one respondent wrote that they “received some micro aggressive comments about running for office while pregnant and told that would be a liability.”⁵⁶ Another was told that “women cannot serve in office and also take care of their families” in the early 2000s, while another was told her “body language was off putting” and that she was “too serious and should smile more.”

Women in public office often face sexism in their work and have their qualifications questioned. One survey respondent’s candidacy “was put on the back of the local paper, when the men running were put on page one.” Despite that fact that she had “been serving in public committees and boards and running nonprofits for 15 years,” it was assumed she “didn’t know [her] stuff even when [she] put [her] bio out there.” Another respondent wrote that she was silenced by men while serving on a Vermont school board. “Things that were my idea [were] given cred by the men on the board or my suggestions were ignored by the superintendent,” she said. “I found I had to get loud and stern to get heard.”

“My fitness to serve has been questioned given my age and gender. I have been challenged and had it suggested I won’t have time to have children and my intelligence and qualification to serve is constantly questioned in spite of my extensive policy experience and masters degree with a focus on social policy.” -survey respondent (call out box)

III. Policy Recommendations

III.A. Increase Legislative Compensation

“Does our current level of legislative pay limit the type of people who can afford to serve to the wealthy, to those who have generous employers, to the retired, and to those willing to make great financial sacrifice? If so, can that be good for our democracy?” -Snelling Report

As mentioned in section II.A. of the report, raising compensation is key to increasing diversity in public office. Within the past three decades, the question of legislative compensation has been studied in response to concerns about its impact on Vermont. For example, many commissions have done research on legislative compensation with the goal of “on maintaining a citizen legislature that allows Vermonters from all walks of life to serve and maintain a level of compensation so that people are not unreasonably deterred from legislative service.” Therefore,

⁵⁶ **Microaggression:** a comment or action that subtly expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group.

compensation shouldn't be so high that it attracts people solely for the money, but not so low that it would be too much of a sacrifice. While compensation is not the only factor in access to serving in the State House, it is closely tied with effectiveness, openness, fairness and representation.

In 1987, the General Assembly created the Leadership Commission on Legislative Compensation and Benefits "in response to a concern ...that the character of the General Assembly as a 'citizen legislature' may be threatened if the level of compensation and benefits is not adequate to allow working Vermonters to continue to serve."⁵⁷ The commission had two main recommendations; the first suggested periodic adjustments to compensation comparable to the average salary of Vermonters working in the private sector of the state, and the second recommended that current benefits be increased and expanded. Suggested benefits included health insurance partially subsidized by the state, a dental insurance plan, and a life insurance benefit, in addition to exploring ways to provide child care to legislators.

In 1994, the General Assembly appointed a Citizen's Commission of Legislative Compensation for Expenses.⁵⁸ The commission was guided by three principles when making recommendations; the importance of having legislators of different income levels, occupations, and interests, the importance of providing reimbursement for all legislative costs, and defining legislative costs more clearly to assure the public that costs are related to legislative services. This commission recommended changes to levels of meals, lodging, and mileage reimbursement, and an allowance to reimburse legislators for the direct costs of constituent services.

In January of 2004, the Snelling Center for Government published a comprehensive study on compensation to provide data and analysis for future action by the legislature.⁵⁹ The goal of the study was to evaluate and recommend appropriate levels and methods of compensation and benefits for legislative branch service. As questions arose in the study, the Snelling Center sent out surveys to the General Assembly, receiving just over 60 responses, to identify "key legislative activities" (during and outside of the session) to estimate the expenses related to legislative work.

When this report was published, legislative salaries had not been adjusted since 1997. The Snelling Center created five recommendations based on their findings. Three out of the five recommendations have since been implemented. The first two recommendations were to increase the base salaries for legislators equal to the average Vermont private sector salaries and to tie future adjustments in legislative pay to a specific benchmark that is adjusted annually to keep up with the private sector. These two recommendations were enforced starting January 1st, 2007 for each member of the General Assembly, other than the Speaker of the House and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate.⁶⁰ The third recommendation that has since been implemented is to set legislative reimbursement rates annually equal to the rates determined by the federal government.

Although Vermont has made strides to increase legislative compensation and reimbursements rates, there is still room for improvement to make the legislature more

⁵⁷ [Compensating Government Officials in Vermont: A Report to the Legislature](#)

⁵⁸ [Compensating Government Officials in Vermont: A Report to the Legislature](#)

⁵⁹ [Compensating Government Officials in Vermont: A Report to the Legislature](#)

⁶⁰ <https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2020/Docs/BILLS/H-0800/H-0800%20As%20Introduced.pdf>

accessible to all Vermonters. For example, the recommendation made in the Snelling report to provide compensation for at least a portion of time and expenses beyond the actual session has not been enacted, despite being proposed almost two decades ago. This change would “cover both their work during the legislative session and their normal legislative duties when the legislature is not in session.” The report recommends paying the full weekly compensation for 20 weeks while in session, with the balance paid regularly throughout the remainder of the year. This recommendation is reflected in H.800, an act introduced in 2020 relating to legislative compensation during adjournment.⁶¹ This bill proposes that “a member is entitled to an amount equal to one-fifth of the annually adjusted weekly compensation set forth in subdivision (1) of this subsection, rounded up to the nearest dollar, for each week during adjournment that the General Assembly is not in session.” Although it was read once and referred to the Committee on Government Operations in January 2020, it has not gone anywhere since.⁶²

Everyone deserves fair compensation for their work, and this recommendation would help to lessen the financial burden for legislators who depend on another job to support themselves or their families, as well as pay legislators for their work outside the session. One of the goals of the Snelling report is to “provide reasonable remuneration for legislators that will allow citizens from many different backgrounds to serve without economic hardship.” Providing compensation outside the legislative session is one small step in supporting legislators from all economic backgrounds. This should not be seen as a percent increase in salary, but rather as a way to fairly compensate legislators for the work they are already taking on.

To further achieve equal representation and incentivize diverse residents to serve in the State Legislature, the Racial Equity Task Force recommends providing a needs-based stipend for legislators based on household income and assets.⁶³ An additional stipend could be based on child care needs to increase the accessibility of child care for legislators with young children. Funds should be appropriated by the Legislature, and the identity of individual members who receive these stipends should be protected to ensure anonymity.

“If we truly want a citizens legislature that allows any and all Vermonters to serve, we must look at increased pay for legislators, including pay during the months that members are not in the State House.” -survey respondent

III.B. Extend Healthcare Benefits

The final recommendation in the Snelling report calls for the state to provide support for legislators to cover health insurance for those who are not already covered or otherwise provided such benefits.⁶⁴ A monthly allowance should be allotted to legislators to maintain existing health plans or to purchase their own plans on the private market. The Snelling Center recommends that this allowance “be up to, but not more than, the state’s share of participation

⁶¹ [An act relating to legislative compensation during adjournment](#)

⁶² [Bill Status H.800](#)

⁶³ [Report of the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force](#)

⁶⁴ [Compensating Government Officials in Vermont: A Report to the Legislature](#)

in the most popular plan available to state employees,” and only be provided during the months that the General Assembly is in session. For those who work an additional job and currently not covered during session, this would give legislators the opportunity to be covered during session when they otherwise would not be.

III.C. Parenting in Public Office

To address the specific challenges to serving in public office with young children, the following recommendations could be implemented:

III.C.1 Increase Child Care Access

There are multiple ways the General Assembly can increase support for legislators with young children. One solution is providing on-site child care in Montpelier. At least two states, Alaska and Connecticut, offer on-site child care specifically for legislators. In Alaska, The Discovery Preschool at the Capitol Complex was established in 2009 by the Legislature.⁶⁵ The preschool provides care for infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children. Priority is given to legislators, legislative staff, state employees, city employees and then the general public. The Capitol Child Development Center was established by the Connecticut State Legislature in 1988.⁶⁶ Legislative, executive, and judicial state employees are prioritized for child care services, but the complex also serves the general public when space is available.

According to research from the NCSL, other states have passed legislation that allows for the creation of child care facilities in or near state buildings, but it is unclear if any such facilities are currently in place. Maine, for example, passed legislation (Title 22 Section 8307), which requires the state to evaluate the status of state financed or operated child care facilities and programs for children of state employees, and create plans for the development of additional facilities going forward.⁶⁷ Providing on-site child care can allow parents greater flexibility when working in the State House.

III.C.2. Align Scheduling

Besides increasing child care access, there are many other ways to make the legislative schedule more accommodating to working legislators and legislators with young children. One way to do this is to implement a prescribed session length, recommended by the Racial Equity Task Force.⁶⁸ Having a set end time for the session would ensure that Vermonters who rely on additional employment other than legislative work are able to provide clear start dates for their employers when the session ends.

Another way to support legislators with young children would be to cut the February and April breaks and shift to a break in March, aligned with the Legislative calendar, and end school one week earlier. Alternatively, Vermont schools could align with twenty-nine other states and

⁶⁵ [The Discovery Preschool | Child care center | 206 Fourth Street, Juneau, AK](#)

⁶⁶ [Capitol Child Development Center](#)

⁶⁷ [Title 22, §8307: State employee child care programs](#)

⁶⁸ [Report of the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force](#)

increase the current 175 days of school per year to 180.⁶⁹ The week-long break for legislators with the Spring Break of Vermont public schools. This would decrease the need for additional child care, as legislators could spend time with their children that week instead of balancing legislative work and having their kids home during the day.

Lastly, when legislative meetings move back to Montpelier once it is safe to do so, legislators should still be allowed to attend virtually. The need for virtual options is shown in the survey results, as 38 percent of survey respondents selected “telework options” as something that would have allowed them to run for office sooner. Not only would this decrease commute times, but it would also allow more flexibility for legislators who need to pick their kids up from various activities. These changes would increase the ability for Vermonters with young children and working Vermonters to be able to serve in the State Legislature.

Survey Quote to highlight:

“I am very pleased that there are so many younger members in the legislature today. Our citizen legislature should reflect the diversity of our population with respect to age, race, identity, etc. I'm one of the older members and feel that my perspective is valuable, but I also value the perspective of those who continue to maintain jobs outside the legislature. From my own experience I sometimes wonder how they do it, especially if they still have children at home to support.”

III.C.3. Improve Lactation Room Options

The lactation room in the State House should be easily accessible and private for anyone who needs to utilize the space. In a conversation with a representative, she discussed multiple ways that the lactation room can be improved. One way to make it more accessible is to create clear signage for where the room is located in the State House. Signs could include a map of the State House layout, as well as clear directions for how to navigate to the room. Another recommendation made by the representative is to install an internal lock on the door to ensure privacy. This is the bare minimum the State House can do for legislators and the general public who use this room.

Besides the physical changes needed in the lactation room, the representative added that there needs to be wider acceptance of serving with young children. When someone needs to step out of the room to pump, there should be “no questions asked.” She said that there is often judgement placed on working moms with young children, and that creating an inclusive space must include “normalizing pumping in the State House and being a young parent while serving.”

III.D. Combating Racial and Gender Bias and Harassment

In the Racial Equity Task Force report mentioned previously, multiple recommendations were provided for encouraging Vermonters from diverse, marginalized, or underrepresented

⁶⁹ [Table 5.14. Number of instructional days and hours in the school year, by state: 2018](#)

racial and ethnic groups to run and serve in public office at all levels.⁷⁰ These recommendations can create a safer and more inclusive space for Vermonters from underrepresented communities who want to serve in Vermont public office.

As referenced previously, there have been numerous accounts of harassment and threats towards BIPOC leaders in Vermont, and specifically towards women of color. To address hate speech and harassment, both preventative and restorative strategies are needed. While there is a great need to address the structural issues that lead to racist threats and harassment in Vermont, this section will discuss options for restorative strategies that seek to hold aggressors accountable for their actions to ultimately provide greater protections for leaders of color. Although Vermont has already expanded its list of protected categories beyond federal minimums by providing access to legal recourse for Vermonters experiencing harassment, the legislature can do more to create a culture where everyone feels safe and valued.

To continue this work towards a more inclusive and safe legislature, the Racial Equity Task Force recommended the following strategies:

1. First, that the state mandate the reporting of hate crimes uniformly across all law enforcement agencies in Vermont. This would streamline data collection and reporting processes, as well as ensure that all individual cases are addressed and not forgotten.
2. Second, that the state adds confidentiality provisions for complainants in civil hate crimes investigations. Currently, no such provisions exist, which creates an unsafe environment for those who want to speak up about their experiences, including fear of retaliation from future employers, community members, and housing providers. By ensuring confidentiality for complainants, the legislature can ensure that leaders who are faced with violent threats or harassment can safely report their experiences without fear of retaliation.
3. Third, that statute be amended to permit the attorney general's office to seek compensatory damages on behalf of the victims of hate crimes.
4. And finally, to conduct a review and possible revision of the "malicious motivation" legal standard for hate crimes in Vermont. This process is time-consuming, so "many cases featuring egregious behavior are not pursued or do not result in a finding that violation occurred" which further discourages victims of harassment to come forward with their story, and fails to hold aggressors accountable for their actions.

These recommendations are a first step to protecting BIPOC leaders, but more action needs to be taken to ensure that leaders of color are not only safe while serving in public office, but that their voices and perspectives are prioritized.

⁷⁰ [Report of the Vermont Racial Equity Task Force](#)

Conclusion

The Vermont State Legislature should be representative of the state as a whole so that policies truly address the needs of all communities. However, the state has a long way to go to reach equal representation. The recommendations proposed above are just a starting point in increasing representation in the legislature, but further research should be done to explore various ways to include Vermonters from all walks of life in the legislature. One idea brought up in conversation and in the BPO survey results is to reduce the number of representatives in order to raise compensation. Staffing is another option to consider. Although the lack of personal staff creates difficulties for all legislators, adding paid staff has the potential to alleviate some of the workload for legislators. These subjects could be further researched by comparing other citizen legislatures who have reduced their number of representatives or added paid staff, and compare demographics of said legislature before and after these changes.

Angela's questions after reading

Appendices

Acknowledgements

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge some of the many people who played a role in shaping this report. First, I would like to thank the 92 people who responded to my survey. Your willingness to share your experiences with me was crucial in providing evidence of the various barriers facing Vermonters when campaigning for and serving in public office.

Second, I would like to thank staff from the National Conference of State Legislatures Martha Saenz, Selena Saucedo, and Amanda Zoch, as well as staff from Women in Government (WIG) Lucy Gettman, Maura LaGue, and WIG intern Rebecca Darmetko. Thank you for pointing me in the right direction as I began this process.

Third, I would like to thank Cary Brown, Executive Director at Vermont Commission on Women, Representative Leslie Goldman, Senator Ruth Hardy, former Speaker of the House Mitzi Johnson, Senator Keshia Ram, Representative Lucy Rogers, and Representative Emma Mulvaney-Stanak. I am so grateful for the time all of you took to meet with me and offer your valuable insights.

I would also like to thank three people from my Legislative Communities of Practice class. To Richard Watts, thank you for guiding me through this process and reminding me not to stress too much. To Liz First Raddock, thank you for being so encouraging and supportive throughout the semester. And to Angela Camacho-DeSousa, I could not have written this report if you weren't there to keep me going.

Lastly, my biggest thanks goes out to Representative Tiff Blumle and Representative Gabrielle Stebbins. Without your leadership, this idea would not have become a reality. You have both been so incredible throughout this semester and I have loved working with both of you.

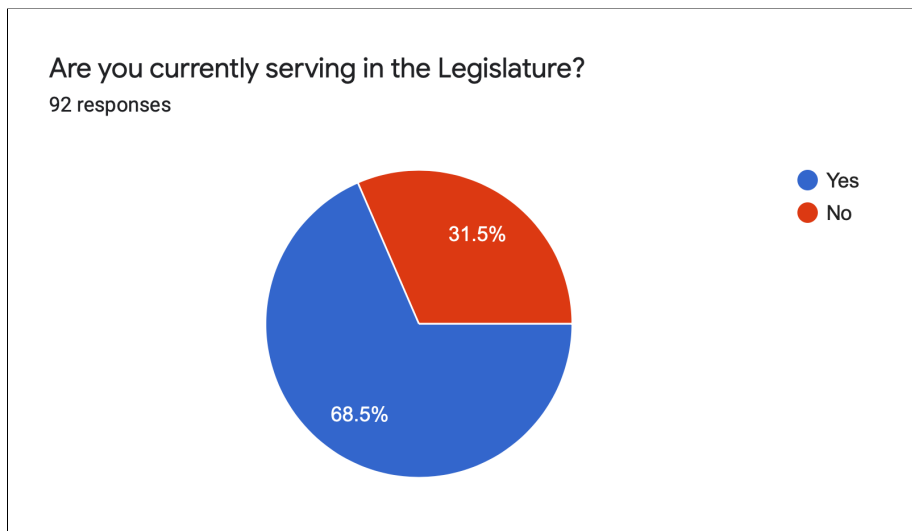
Survey Methods

The “Barriers to Serving in Public Office” (BPO) survey was sent in April 2021 to all members of the Vermont General Assembly, City Council and Select Board members from eight towns in Vermont, and members of Emerge Vermont. All identifying information of survey respondents has been removed from this report.

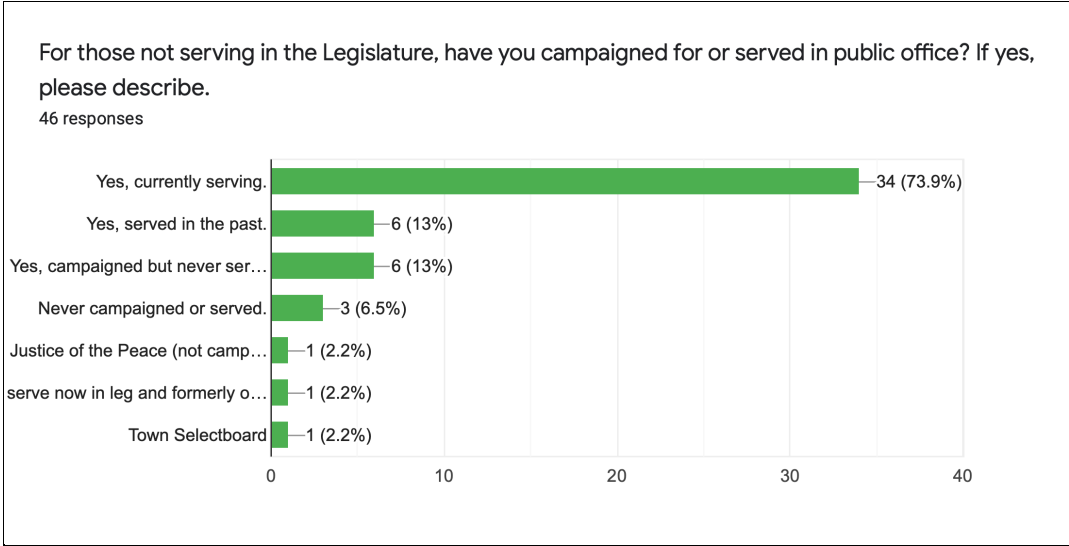
Survey Results

Below are the results of the “Barriers to Serving in Public Office” survey. All bulleted responses are direct quotes from survey respondents. Open-ended questions are organized based on subject material.

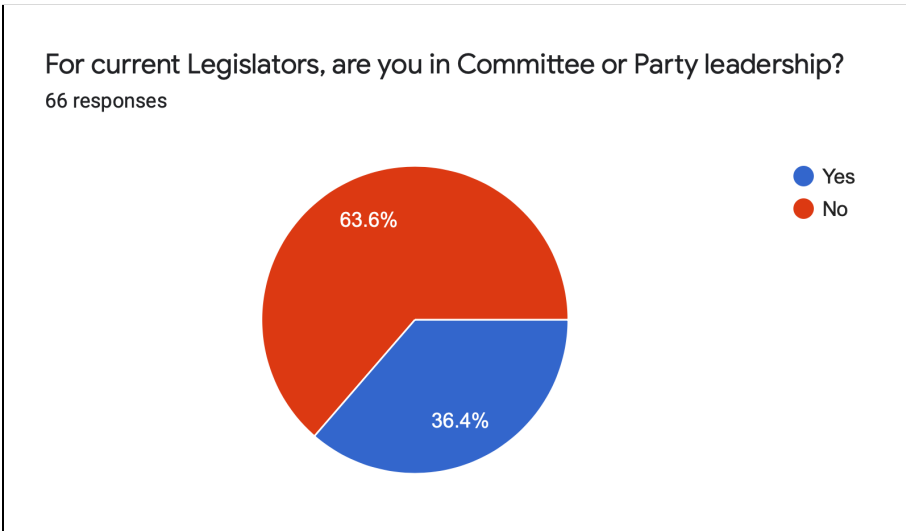
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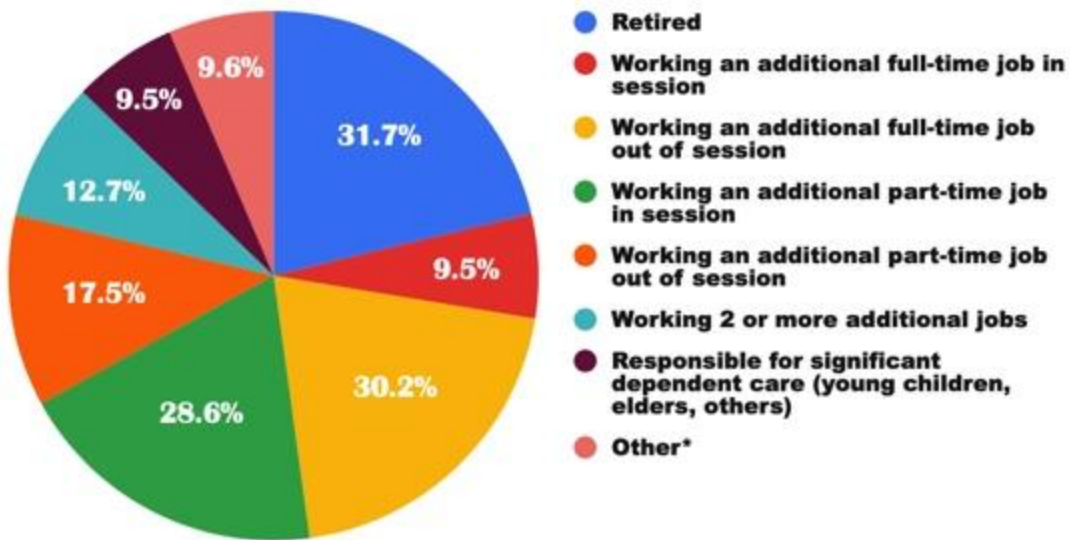


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4.

For current Legislators: What is your employment status aside from working in the State House?



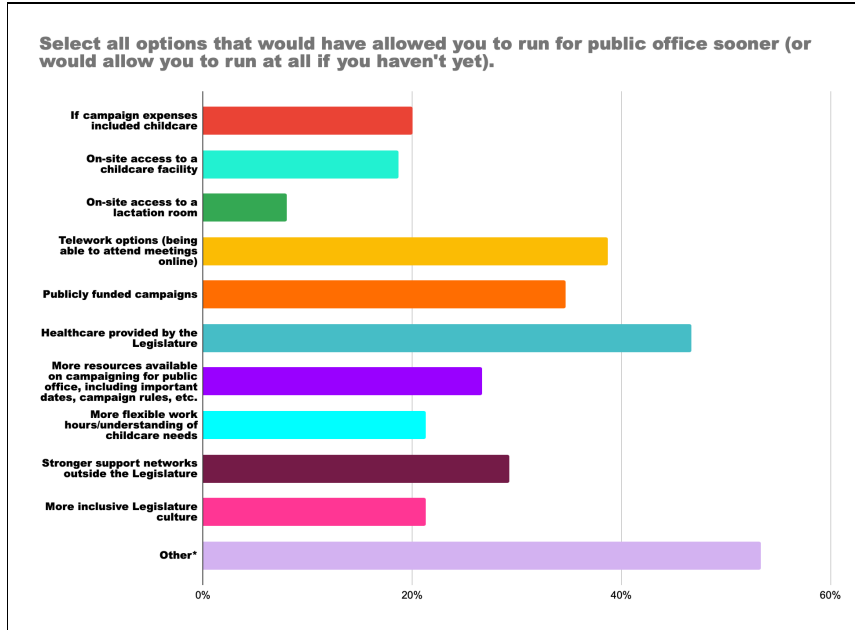
***Other responses included:**

- Also work 8-10 hours/weeks the session.
- I did work an additional job for 20 years.
- No other employment, but not really retired.
- Just a regular person and not working otherwise.
- With the pandemic, when child care and/or public school shuts down due to a COVID case for a week or more, I also need to provide full time child care (with my spouse) for our two young children. We also need to provide regular remote school support and child care once a week for the remote learning day (Wednesday) every week.

5. How many children do you have, if any? Please specify the number of children and age.

Individual answers were not included in this report to ensure anonymity.

6.



***Other Responses included:**

Compensation:

- Higher compensation (mentioned by 22% of respondents).
- Higher pay so we can support a family.
- There was no pay increase in my first eight years, no benefits.

Balancing Work and Family:

- Full time demanding job did not allow for serving in the legislature, retirement opened the opportunity.
- No time during my career, I ran when I retired and could afford the time.
- I was asked to run for office 15 years before I actually did. I declined the invitation to run the first time due to having young children at home. It would have been extremely difficult to manage both. My first year in office, I was also working full time as an executive director of an organization. I only did both jobs for one year and that was enough!
- I chose to run once all kids in college.

No barriers/None Applied:

- There are ZERO barriers to running for VT Legislator. I did it with a young child and low income. If someone wants to do it, they can do it.
- None of these prevented me from running.
- All important, but none exactly applied to me.

Other:

- Too long a commute.
- Ranked choice voting so I didn't feel my candidacy was hurting an incumbent of my party.
- Making this a full time, year long position. This would require a reduction in the # of reps so the same funding could support the Legislature.
- A low or no cost mentorship program. Emerge looks great. There's no way I could

afford it. I also don't particularly understand election strategy - I was VERY lucky to have a couple friends/volunteers who did.

7. For those who have not run for public office, what still stands in the way for you?

Compensation:

- Being able to afford to serve without additional employment that could be a potential conflict of interest.
- Salary for legislators; if not salary, more flexibility.
- The salary is too low, and no healthcare. I can't find a job for only 6 months of the year that would pay enough to sustain me and my family the other 6 months I'd be in the Legislature. And the prospect of not having good healthcare is a non-starter for me.
- Can't afford it - primary breadwinner in my family.
- Money and the obvious public exposure required for office.
- Monetary wealth! You have to be financially comfortable to serve in public office, which is a huge flaw of the system.
- Pay and staff concerns.

Balancing Work and Family:

- When you run for office with teens, they are under the scrutiny of your small community. Teens bring very different challenges than young kids. They need less of your time but more of your focus and emotional energy. And they need protection from publicity. Women who run for office have their kids front and center whether they want it or not.
- How to balance with family time and full-time employment

Other:

- Sexism, classism, homophobia, poverty, food insecurity, housing instability
- Currently content with those who represent me but when that changes I will run.
- Distance to Montpelier

8. Have you experienced any hostility directed at you in relation to your interest in public office? Please describe.

Many survey respondents mentioned having to face angry or aggressive emails from constituents or others while serving in public office. Some have experienced higher levels of hostility such as receiving threatening phone calls, being harassed, being and stalked. Below are a few of the responses submitted. One survey respondent noted the importance of acknowledging the "disproportionate violence and obstacles that marginalized Vermonters face."

Hostility Based on Identity:

- BIPOC & LGBTQ Vermonters carry a significantly higher emotional burden when

running for office due to the real threat of violence to themselves and their families. Increased awareness about the disproportionate violence and obstacles that marginalized Vermonters face is essential.

- Only some ageism. Someone telling me that I was too young to be on the selectboard and shouldn't be running.
- Yes, I received a good deal of negative, sexist hostility from people I had never met when I announced my decision to run for public office.
- Yes - racism and other forms of discrimination

Threats:

- Yes, I have been threatened (multiple times) for my votes in favor of gun safety legislation.
- No, just trying to strike a balance between work and family, particularly when the kids were younger.
- As a currently elected official I regularly experience such hostility in the form of nasty and sometimes threatening emails. Since being elected we now lock our house and my husband does think much more about our safety as a result of me serving in the legislature.
- Yep, the most extreme was violent and threatening phone calls at my place of business during the 2020 election cycle. To a lesser degree, I receive aggressive emails and harsh FPF/SM posts. That I was expecting
- Yes, when I was running I supported a group who was calling out a selectman for sending a racist email to newspaper. I was harassed and stalked by his friends and relatives and accused of things I did not do. I was called names when campaigning in front of voting area but won my election.

Sexism:

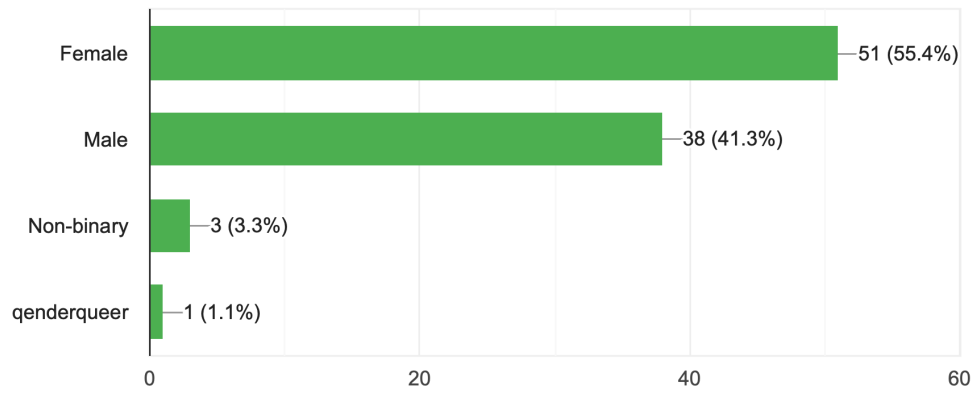
- Was told that women cannot serve in office and also take care of their families (a long time ago, early 2000s)
- While on the board I was silenced by men. Things that were my idea was given credit by the men on the board or my suggestions were ignored by the super indent. I found I had to get loud and stern to get heard.
- I don't know that I have experienced outright hostility but my fitness to serve has been questioned given my age and gender. I have been challenged and had it suggested I won't have time to have children and my intelligence and qualification to serve is constantly questioned in spite of my extensive policy experience and masters degree with a focus on social policy.
- Yes, I have experienced hostility for taking on an incumbent in the primary - I was told to wait my turn for when the seat was open. I also received some micro aggressive comments about running for office while pregnant (was thinking of running in 2018 when I was also thinking of getting pregnant) and told that would be a potential liability (public perception of being pregnant and what kind of parent am I for running while pregnant and/or serving with an infant).

Other:

- No more than usual. Always some dislike from some.

How do you identify?

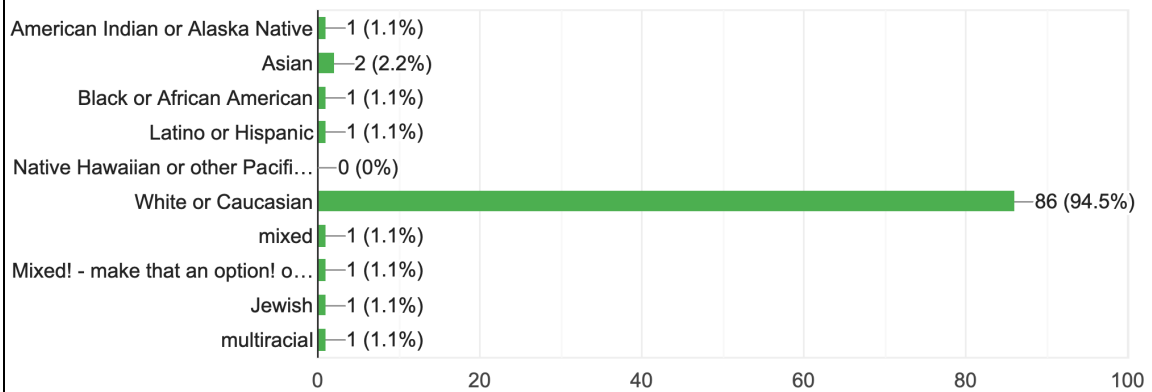
92 responses



10.

How do you describe yourself?

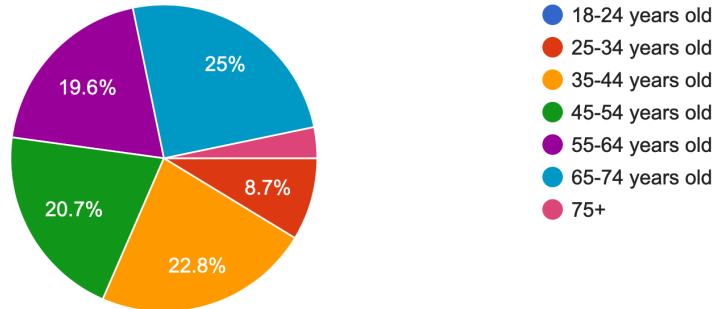
91 responses



11.

What is your age?

92 responses



12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Compensation/Healthcare:
Scheduling:
Child Care:
Discrimination/Bias:

Other State Policies

- I. [Other State Policies](#)
- II. [Rebecca Darmetko- Legislature Diversity Research](#)

Spotlight on Organizations in Vermont Dedicated to Diversifying Public Office

Why I added this...

The Bright Leadership Institute

The Bright Leadership Institute (BLI) is a multi-stage training program for BIPOC Vermonters who wish to run for public office at any level or take on a community leadership role.⁷¹ Initially an idea formed by Tabitha Moore and Steffen Gollim, both founding presidents of the Rutland and Windham NAACP branches, BLI provides trainings in topics including leadership values, philosophy, public communications, and fundraising in a way that “recognizes the unique challenges and opportunities for BIPOC Vermonters.” Other leaders of this program

⁷¹ [Bright Leadership Institute](#)

include Representative Nader Hashim, vice president of the Windham NAACP branch, Arshad Hasan of Convey Communications, Senator Kesha Ram, the first woman of color to serve in the Vermont Senate, and Mia Schultz, the current president of the Rutland NAACP branch.

The institute was named after former State Representative Louvenia Dorsey Bright, the first Black state legislator in modern Vermont history, serving from 1988 to 1994 for three terms.⁷² The program strives to create supportive and robust networks of peers for BIPOC Vermonters who aspire to run for office, all while centering the voices of those who identify as queer, femme, women, or are from economically marginalized BIPOC communities.

In February of 2021, plans to launch this program were announced at a press conference led by Kiah Morris, Senator Ram, Kia. “We have many leaders gathered here today that are ‘firsts’ from their community,” Senator Ram said at the press conference. “We are proud and honored to be first, but it comes with tremendous challenge and a deep weight on our shoulders. And we certainly don’t want to be the ‘only’ or the ‘last.’”⁷³ The Bright Leadership Institute is a much needed resource to support BIPOC Vermonters running for office, but Kiah Morris points out that it is part of a long-term goal to help people of color feel welcome in Vermont. “Creating solidarity and identity and a focused intention on changing this very landscape — this is something we have to do today,” Morris said, “because we cannot lose more of our bright minds.”⁷⁴

Emerge Vermont

Emerge Vermont is a non-profit organization that works to increase the number of Democratic women leaders from diverse backgrounds.⁷⁵ They carry out their mission through recruiting, training, and providing a powerful network to Democratic women who want to run for office. EmERGE champions women because “women legislators are more responsive to constituents, value cooperation over hierarchical power, and find collaborative solutions to difficult problems.” They provide a six-month, 70+ hour training that provides aspiring Vermonters with the tools needed to run for public office, through training in public speaking, fundraising, campaign strategy, voter contact, and more. EmERGE also provides a supportive network of EmERGE alumni, board members, and advisory council members from across the country. 36 EmERGE Vermont alumni currently hold elected office, including the state’s only female mayor and the Majority Leader of the State Senate.

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⁷² [Legacy of Louvenia Dorsey Bright in Vermont inspires new institute](#)

⁷³ [New program to support Vermonters of color running for public office](#)

⁷⁴ [New program to support Vermonters of color running for public office](#)

⁷⁵ [Emerge Vermont: State Homepage](#)

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