

Hello- I am Rhoni Basden, Executive Director at VT Works for Women. Thank you to all committee members for inviting us to speak on critical programs that are helping to address increasing needs and labor challenges across our state.

Women are a critical part of our workforce and significant contributors to the growth our communities. Yet the fact remains that women remain underrepresented in career fields that are most critical and in demand all across Vermont. Fields such as construction, electrical, weatherization, flood recovery, and infrastructure development.

VT Works for Women has been working since 1987 to raise awareness on career opportunities, provide hard skills training, trades certification programs, and connect women and youth directly to employers and continuing education.

Our Trailblazers training program, geared towards women and gender expansive individuals, runs from Barre, to Rutland, Brattleboro, to Burlington and over to Newport! Trailblazers provides paid training in construction, electric, plumbing, weatherization, and solar installation. We are seeing increased demand for this pre-apprenticeship training program that pairs the hard skills training necessary to be job ready, with the support and empowerment to ensure retention and growth within trades work and careers. This work includes partnering with employers and industries across the state to ensure family sustaining and motivating work environments that not only meet current state needs, but help work towards long term goals of increased labor and community growth. We are currently working with over 89 employers in active gender equity supports and participant connection.

We also need to ensure we are looking at future needs and opportunities- to reach the untapped potential here in VT in our youth. VWW works provides youth programming that exposes middle and high school students to career pathways, trainings programs, and partners to dismantle the stereotypes around entering trades industries or construction work. We partner with schools and career & technical centers to support increased female enrollment and retention- recognizing that we need to increase our representation of women to meet long term state needs on ensuring 5,000 carpenters, or 3,000 welders and just general workers.

Increasing access to construction careers and growing our labor force only works in collaboration. We are proud to partner with our state agencies, community organizations and employers to ensure that all Vermonters have access to quality training programs that connect them to motivating employment. VWW is at the table with Burlington Electric, the Broadband Board, the weatherization training center, regional development coalitions and infrastructure projects that all support a shared vision of connecting individuals to vital, growing pathways across Vermont.

It is no longer an opportunity to talk about diversifying our industries, it is now an obligation- we need to intentionally invest in workforce development to have the workers needed to meet current and future demand. Vermont women today have a 79.5% employment participation rate, that closely matches VT men at 81.9%. Yet, we see that women represent only 3.9% of construction careers. There are opportunities to not only work to empower, upskill and provide opportunities to women today who are ready to enter these high demand, high wage fields- but to also invest in the potential of our youth and women.

Our partnership in Serve, Learn and Earn has been vital to VWW growing the opportunities, reach, access, and connection of our programs across Vermont. We know the demand and interest is there, but it needs to be accessible and intentional- which I am proud to know that each of programs provides an impact that is necessary for our current and emerging needs.