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March 10th, 2014

Re: SILC Position Paper – H. 629

The Vermont Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) would like to express its strong opposition to H. 629, the so-called “elevator bill,” which would significantly dilute regulations requiring elevator/lift access to multi-story commercial buildings.

By Federal mandate, the SILC oversees independent living (IL) programs and services in the State. Thus, in keeping with its charge, the SILC thinks such a potential change would harm employment opportunities – an integral part of IL - for people with disabilities. People with mobility disabilities, in particular - such as wheelchair users - would be less able to find employment at multi-level facilities.

Historically, Vermont has been a leader in the disability rights and IL movements. 20 years ago, the State of Vermont decided upon more stringent standards than the federal ADA regarding elevator/lift access to multi-story commercial dwellings. In part, this was due to the rural and sparsely-populated nature of the State and thus generally smaller structures, as compared to states with numerous large urban centers. The 1000 sq. ft. minimum threshold for elevator/lift access thus made sense. Increasing the minimum square footage requirement to 3000 sq. ft., albeit to conform with the ADA, would essentially eliminate employment opportunities for a significant number of people with mobility disabilities.

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People with disabilities contribute to the socioeconomic well-being of our great State and should not be deprived of opportunities to do so; nor should they be deprived generally of opportunities to live independently with dignity. Indeed any attempt to limit development costs should not be at the expense of the disability community - particularly at a time when initiatives to enhance employment opportunities for this population are proceeding on a bipartisan basis nationwide.

The VT SILC certainly supports sustainable statewide development and enhancement of economic prospects. However, does not a healthier approach for our society entail the incorporation of people with disabilities in all aspects of such? Let us not follow a short-sighted and regressive approach; rather, let us ensure the integration and inclusion of all members of our great State in all of our endeavors.

Retail developers are indeed realizing that people with disabilities possess and spend money; hence, the recent positive trends toward ensuring elevator/lift access to retail establishments. It might be difficult for some to understand the equal importance of ensuring access to employment, at least at first consideration. However, when one considers the entire scenario, that difficulty should vanish.

The SILC urges our friends on the General, Housing and Military Affairs Committee and in the House of Representatives, generally, to re-consider the stipulations within H.629 and support a balanced, reasonable, equitable and inclusive approach to economic expansion and societal well-being.

Respectfully submitted,

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