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**People's Budget Campaign Testimony to
Senate Government Operations Committee
January 22, 2014**

Good Afternoon. My name Nicole LeBlanc from Montpelier. I want to thank the committee for this opportunity to testify. I am the Advocacy Coordinator for Green Mountain Self-Advocates. We are a peer-run organization for and by people with developmental disabilities. We have 21 local peer support groups across the state with over 600 members. We are working with the Vermont Workers' Center and many other organizations in the People's Budget campaign. Our goal is to change the conversation around the state budget by focusing on managing to need instead of money.

Our Position on S. 293

We welcome that S.293 is somewhat aligned with the People's Budget campaign goals around accountability, which require a comprehensive assessment of fundamental human need. Yet we also believe that any new accountability measures should be part of a clear policy framework that is consistent with the purpose of the state budget, enacted in 2012. Conventional notions of results-based accountability, including the measures presented in S. 293, do not offer such a framework. Yet we believe that accountability to meeting people's needs and rights is both possible and necessary, and can be achieved if the committee is able to allocate more time for this discussion this session.

Budget Purpose and Process

The People's Budget campaign seeks a state budget that is focused on and succeeds in meeting the fundamental human needs of the people of Vermont by applying human rights principles to the budget process.

We believe our elected representatives have been unable to meet their obligation to respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of the people of Vermont because the state budget process lacks a consistent set of principles, clear goals, and a process that would facilitate the right outcomes.

In 2012, the People's Budget campaign was successful in enacting statutory language that defined the purpose of the state budget:

- The state budget now has to focus on addressing human needs and advancing human dignity and equity.
- A process for public participation in all aspects of spending and revenue policy is called for.
- The law recognizes key human needs, corresponding to our economic and social rights, and accountability is called for in both spending and revenue policy.

To implement these provisions, it is clear that we need to incorporate meaningful public participation into the budget process and thus democratize this process. It is also clear that we have to create some form of needs assessment process to guide and measure the budget's success in meeting needs.

To that end, we must be able to develop policy goals and guidelines that correspond to the purpose of the budget. How do we do that? It's not a question of whether our government should be accountable to meeting goals and achieving results, it's a question of how we determine what those goals and results ought to be. S.293 offers a list of outcomes, based on existing practice, but no rationale for why these goals and not others are the right ones.

Budget Principles and Accountability

This is why the People's Budget campaign is proposing to ground the entire budget and revenue process in human rights principles. The essential

principles of *universality* and *equity* are already part of the new statutory language, but their function is not spelt out. Without these two principles, a question like “How well did we do it?” cannot be answered. With these principles, the insufficiency of a question like “Is anyone better off” should be obvious.

The new budget law also makes reference to the procedural principles of *transparency*, *accountability* and *participation*, which are essential to a functioning democracy.

Any budget accountability measures should be rooted in these five principles.

Many efforts seek to apply the term *accountability* to the operations of government and public policy decisions. But what is the source of these notions of accountability? Internal consistency within government operations? Previous sets of policy goals? S. 293 uses departments’ current goals as desirable population level outcomes, but what’s the source of these goals? They seem to be a colorful mix; some outcomes appear measurable, others not; some are linked to human needs, others to government operations. Interestingly, most of S. 293’s indicators are not in fact linked to the stated outcome goals. All of this illustrates that we can’t approach the challenge of accountability in budget and revenue policy in a piecemeal, half-hearted way.

We propose to use principles to guide all public policy, so that policy can be consistent across the board and effective in improving population level outcomes, not just its own operations. From these principles we can derive meaningful goals and indicators; in other words, a practical framework for making and measuring decisions that affect people’s lives. To this end, the understanding of accountability we offer is not only more comprehensive than in S.293, but also rooted in our state’s fundamental obligations to people’s needs and rights, not just in the policy goals of the day. We need an accountability system that measures much more than one set of inputs into a haphazard public policy decision-making process. We need a consistent framework that guides all budget policy and processes, a

framework grounded in human rights principles, with consistent goals, indicators and a participatory methodology of measuring progress. Our People's Budget proposal offers such a framework, not just for spending but also for revenue policy, and we urge the committee to consider this in its discussions of government accountability.

Conclusion

Once again, we thank the committee for this opportunity to take part in the debate on government accountability and to propose a human rights based accountability framework. We look forward to ongoing engagement in creating a people's budget for Vermont.