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March 17, 2017

Rep. Maxine Grad  
Senator Dick Sears  
VT Statehouse  
Montpelier, VT 05620

RE: Urgency of passing H.492 /S.116, formation of the Racial Justice Oversight Board

Dear Representative Grad and Senator Sears:

As a resident of Vermont for over half of my 76 years, I am writing in support of the Racial Justice Oversight Board as described in H.492 and S.116.

My experiences in inner-city neighborhoods of Jersey City and Philadelphia during the 1960s and 1970s alerted me as a young woman to racism in America and in myself, and its effects in our society. One young African-American man asked me calmly as he sat on a door-stoop in North Philadelphia, "Do you think you can know what it's like to be black?" I know now that many people of color in our state (and our country) are affected everyday by implicit as well as explicit racism. Perhaps racism can be considered as our nation's original sin, a moral and spiritual cancer that eats away at our national identity.

An African-American friend tells of her brother being stopped by police, in Vermont, for "driving while black". As a young woman growing up in Vermont she was followed by employees in retail stores, not to help her, but because they were afraid she would steal something. Their dignity as fellow human beings is constantly undermined. Black infants are twice as likely to die before their first birthday, because black people's health is adversely affected in subtle ways by the social and environmental conditions in which they live (1). The most tragic outcome of racism is police killings of African-American men in the streets of America and their deaths in police custody, with essentially no accountability, akin to lynchings earlier in the 20th century. A lynching is an execution of a person without due process.

We have evidence that our Vermont judicial system is infected with racism. The report by Stephanie Seguino and Nancy Brooks (2) documents racism in policing practices in Vermont, and shows that it is counterproductive. Black and brown men are stopped, searched, arrested and imprisoned at disproportionate rates. This inequity is troubling; it undermines justice, public safety and may lead to tragedy in Vermont.

The collusion of Vermont police, Motor Vehicles Dept. personnel and immigration officials to track down, profile and arrest immigrant workers is another unhappy manifestation of racism in our state and undermines public safety and public confidence in law enforcement (3). The model Fair & Impartial Policing Policy reinforced in these bills is designed to correct such injustices.

Our imprisonment of persons of color through the criminal "justice" system and Immigration & Customs Enforcement's (ICE) detention of immigrants both feed into the unjust complexities of the for-profit prison industry. While the US Department of Justice is phasing out its use of for-profit prisons, ICE's use of these prisons has greatly increased. Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and GEO

Group (formerly WackenHut) have persuaded Congress to include in appropriation legislation a *detention bed quota* on ICE requiring DOJ to jail a *pre-determined number of immigrants -- 34,000 people per day---* solely because of their immigration status. This quota policy is driven by for-profit prison lobbyists, not by security needs, to provide increased profits (4). Regardless of whether one supports or opposes increased deportation, the use of prisons-for-profit with detention bed quotas at our expense constitutes an egregious affront to human decency and an incentive to violate human rights.

President Trump's order places no priority on categories of immigrants to be arrested, and includes several new categories of immigrants in ICE's net. Of special concern to me is the category of anyone who, *in the judgment of an immigration officer, may otherwise pose a risk to public safety or national security.* (6) This category appears to invite blatant racial profiling contrary to Vermont's laws.

Racism in police, immigration systems or in any other state systems damages the body politic. The current systems are not able to correct the inequities. We have an opportunity to begin the hard but necessary work of establishing the Racial Justice Oversight Board and of reinforcing by law the Fair & Impartial Policing Policy.

Please do all in your power to enable passage of this legislation.

Sincerely,



Sylvia Knight  
Earth Community Advocate & Researcher

Copies to: 6 Chittenden Senators; Governor Scott; Reps Carol Ode, Curt Wright, Burlington

References:

- (1) Carpenter, Zoe. Black Births Matter. The Nation, March 6, 2017.  
<https://www.thenation.com/article/whats-killing-americas-black-infants/> (viewed 3/17/17)
  - (2) Seguino, S and N. Brooks. Driving in Vermont while Black and Brown.  
[http://www.uvm.edu/giee/pdfs/SeguinoBrooks\\_PoliceRace\\_2017.pdf](http://www.uvm.edu/giee/pdfs/SeguinoBrooks_PoliceRace_2017.pdf) (viewed 3/17/17)
  - (3) Audette, Robert. Bennington Banner. Is Vermont DMV collaborating with ICE? 1/8/15.  
<http://www.benningtonbanner.com/stories/migrant-justice-is-vermont-dmv-collaborating-with-ice,307652> (viewed 3/17/17)
  - (4) National Immigration Justice Center. Detention Bed Quota.  
<https://www.immigrantjustice.org/eliminate-detention-bed-quota> (viewed 3/15/17)
- see also: American Friends Service Committee, The Role of For-Profit Prison Corporations in Shaping U.S. Detention and Deportation Policies. December 2015  
<https://www.afsc.org/sites/afsc.civicaactions.net/files/documents/Bed%20Quota%20White%20Paper-final.pdf> (viewed 3/17/17)
- (5) Hing, Julianne. ICE ramps up. The Nation. March 20, 2017. pp 4,8.