

The Community Equity Collaborative of Southeastern Vermont

325 Partridge Road, East Dummerston, VT 05346

April 5, 2017

Written Testimony Regarding H.492/S.116
Vermont House and Senate Judiciary Committee

Members of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees:

We write you on behalf of the Community Equity Collaborative of Southeastern Vermont in support of passage of H.492(S.116). The number of instances of racial injustice that occur regularly in Vermont related to law enforcement and corrections make it imperative to take up and pass this bill in a timely manner. We request that both committees seriously consider this bill immediately and support its passage in this present legislative session.

The membership of our Collaborative includes educators, faith communities, law enforcement agents, civil servants, town officials, social service professionals and civic groups who have worked together since 2009 to make the greater Brattleboro area an open and welcoming epicenter celebrating diversity free of prejudice and discrimination of all kinds.

On December 12, 2016, we hosted an Emergency Civil Rights Legislative Forum in Brattleboro, well attended by numerous Windham County legislators and citizens despite a heavy snowstorm. H. 492/S.116 as drafted reflects one of the priority actions that our legislators were urged to support at the forum: mandated professional development related to racial injustice in the state of Vermont.

As you consider the bill, we ask you to consider the following improvements:

- Racial Justice Oversight Board Membership: we have serious concern that the appointment of the four members representing communities of color be only the responsibility of the Attorney General. There is some considerable vulnerability in that approach. The hope is for broad-based multi-tiered community representation. We strongly recommend that, once the Committee membership is initially established, appointments of successors representing communities of color be made by the full Committee membership. All new appointments would be in accordance with the statute. This makes the membership selection more community-based.
- We fully approve of the criteria for minimum training standards which stresses “anti-bias, appropriate use of force, and de-escalation training” (p. 6). However, we do not see representation on the committee which reflects expertise in situations which relate to mental

illness.

- We have a concern that the committee has an even number of members which could lead to a stalemate in coming to decisions. We recommend the total membership consist of 13 members and ask you to consider appointing a 13th member from the Vermont Department of Mental Health.

In closing, we endorse the bill and ask you to seriously consider the urgency of the situation it addresses. As allies to our fellow citizens of color in the State who daily experience unfair situations, we convey our strong desire that you take up this bill sooner rather than later.

This letter states our recommendations. In addition, we are prepared to testify personally in support of this bill.

Submitted by:

Diana Wahle, Community Equity Collaborative convenor

Donna Macomber, Women's Freedom Center Legal Justice Program Coordinator

Rev. Lise Sparrow, Guilford Community Church UCC

Judith Palmeri, Academy School Counselor

Michelle Cromwell, SIT Chief Diversity Officer

Manny Mansbach, Vermont Insight Meditation Center educator