

"In the simplest terms, living in a racially just society means that all people, regardless of race or ethnicity, are equally able to lead free, safe, peaceful, and meaningful lives. It is a moral obligation for us to hold our state to a standard in which all people have equal access to these very basic human rights. We must be engaged and proactive in examining our communities and systems for evidence of bias (both implicit and explicit) or disparities in opportunities or outcomes. When discrimination and racial disparities within our systems are revealed, we must urgently and fiercely acknowledge the injustice and implement solutions to disrupt these patterns and rebuild the system in a way that serves and protects everyone. Unfortunately, the data collected in our state in recent years shows us that we are discriminating against people of color at alarming rates. A recent study released by Stephanie Seguino at the University of Vermont examining statewide data revealed that, compared to White drivers, African American drivers are more likely to be ticketed when stopped by law enforcement officers, four times as likely to be searched, and twice as likely to be arrested. Hispanic drivers are also more likely to be ticketed than White drivers, and three times as likely to be searched. In addition, the 2010 census revealed that while African Americans represent 1% of the population in Vermont, they represent 9% of our state's incarcerated population. Hispanic individuals make up 2% of the state's population and 5% of the incarcerated population. In contrast, White individuals make up 94% of the state's population and 82% of the state's incarcerated population. Similar studies have yielded similar results. After examining these studies, it is easy to see that the evidence of racial injustice within our criminal justice system has already been found. It is now up to us to respond with urgency and make Vermont a safe and just place for people of color. This is why I am urging the Judiciary Committee, and all of our state legislators, to say YES to H-492. While past legislation in our state has attempted to address racial disparities in policing, no previous legislation has successfully confronted the racism embedded within our entire criminal justice system, which extends beyond policing practices and affects the way people of color are treated in our courtrooms and prisons as well. Our state is also in desperate need of a method of accountability, so that when evidence of discrimination is discovered, it is sure to be addressed with policy reform and increased bias training. The Racial Justice Oversight Board proposed by H-492 would establish a fair and impartial body to provide this much-needed accountability. H-492 gives us as Vermonters a critical opportunity to decide what kind of community we want to create for ourselves, our children, and our neighbors. We have a chance to take an honest look at the oppression and injustice that infects our criminal justice system and say NO MORE. We are living in a time when our nation's President and his administration have committed openly, repeatedly, and unapologetically to taking hostile action against communities of color. Let us show the nation that Vermont wholeheartedly rejects their racism and bigotry and stands with our communities of color. Please do not pass up this opportunity. The time for racial justice in Vermont is NOW. This cannot wait. Information Accessed From: Sakala, Leah. "Vermont Profile." Prison Policy Initiative. Prison Policy Initiative, May 2014. Web. 22 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/VT.html>>. Seguino, Stephanie, and Nancy Brooks. Driving While Black and Brown in Vermont. Rep. University of Vermont, 9 Jan. 2017. Web. 22 Mar. 2017."

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