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Senator Claire Ayer, Chair
Senate Committee on Health and Welfare
Vermont Statehouse, Room 17
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Re: H.673, An Act Relating to Miscellaneous Amendments to the Reach Up Program

Dear Senator Ayer and Members of the Committee on Health and Welfare:

I am writing on behalf of Vermont Legal Aid to express our support for House Bill 673. Many of our clients at Vermont Legal Aid participate in the Reach Up program, and we support the Department for Children and Families' efforts to make the program more efficient for participants and Department staff and responsive to the needs of low-income Vermonters.

Families participating in Reach Up face significant barriers to self-sufficiency that can be carried from one generation to the next. The changes proposed by this bill that I'd like to highlight today are: (1) changes to the vehicle ownership rules to increase opportunities for low-income young adults; (2) enhancing the flexibility of the work requirements to give parents the opportunity to succeed in Vermont's workforce; and (3) improving educational deferment rules to allow Reach Up families to participate in a greater variety of educational and training programs to improve their long-term economic prospects.

As Erin Oalican mentioned in her previous testimony, 2200 of 2800 of Reach Up families reside outside major transportation hubs. Access to transportation for these families is access to opportunity, including for the well-being and the personal development of young adult in these families. Take the case of Sonia and Jennifer. Sonia wasn't receiving Reach Up because her earnings of \$800 per month and a small amount of child support put her over the program's income limit. Even though her income was low, she was able to put together enough money for both her daughter, Jennifer, and herself to have cheap cars. Sonia used her car to get to her part-time job and to go to school to get a nursing degree. Jenn used her vehicle to get to her weekend job at a clothing store, participate in fashion design competitions around New England, and volunteer with a youth group, all while studying hard at school to get good grades. Thanks to Jenn's ability to get around to participate in these programs and make extra money, Jenn was able to pay for applications to several prestigious colleges of design and is now attending (and succeeding) in college. This is an example of how access to a vehicle can help break the cycle of poverty. Had Jenn's mother been on Reach Up, she would have been unable to provide her daughter with a vehicle and maintain her eligibility – the vehicle that was essential to giving Jenn

access to opportunities to improve her family's finances and her long-term prospects. The proposed statutory change to § 1103 (Section 1 of the bill) is important to give Vermont's rural youth from low-income families equal access to employment and other opportunities to enhance their self-development.

The current work requirement rules are complicated for families to understand and make it more difficult for Reach Up participants to comply with program rules and access the workforce in a way that meets the needs and abilities of each unique Vermont family. Many of my clients piece together part-time work, odd jobs, and seasonal employment to meet their work requirements. They are home health aides and personal care attendants in senior living facilities, and frequently are assigned only part-time hours. The same is true for food service workers, customer service representatives, manual labor for contractors and property maintenance, and so forth. I see families piecing together this type of work to make ends meet and satisfy work requirements, with the primary wage earner fluctuating from one week to the next depending upon the needs of their employers and the season. This bill presents a much less complicated set of work requirements that will allow families to better comply with the rules and participate in Vermont's workforce.

Lastly, looking to the educational deferment amendments to 33 V.S.A. § 1114(b) (Section 4 of H.673), I see this as a wonderful change to help get all Vermonters on a more level playing field as they develop their skills and enter the workforce. My office is in Burlington, and many of my clients are New Americans who have had little to no access to education prior to arriving in the United States. I see these parents working so hard for their families, juggling English as a second language classes, economic literacy programs, Rent Right to learn how to be good tenants, and working part-time at whatever jobs they can get. They want to build skills to be able to provide for their families and build a better future for their children, and I see this rule change as a critical tool in expanding opportunities for growth for Vermonters.

Thank you for your consideration of this bill and the important improvements it will make to the Reach Up program for vulnerable Vermonters.

Sincerely,

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