



Vermont Partnership

FOR FAIRNESS AND DIVERSITY

Testimony Regarding Proposed S.281
Senate Government Operations Committee
Vermont Statehouse • 24 January 2018

Introduction and Disclosures

For the record my name is Curtiss Reed, Jr., Executive Director of Vermont Partnership for Fairness & Diversity. And for full disclosure I serve as Chair of the Vermont State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, as member of the Secretary of Education's Harassment, Hazing, and Bullying Commission, as member of the Vermont State Police Fair and Impartial Policing Commission, and as a founding member of the Community Equity Collaborative that serves southeastern Vermont.

In addition, I have served or currently serve as a consultant and trainer in the areas of implicit bias and economic development for a variety of state agencies including the Vermont State Police, Agency of Commerce and Community Development/Department of Tourism, Agency of Natural Resources/Fish & Wildlife, and the Department of Human Resources. I also serve as a consultant and trainer in the areas of diversity, inclusion, and equity for municipal governments, nonprofit organizations, and businesses in northern New England.

As a Black man in Vermont I am acutely aware of the devastating impact White supremacy and racism have on my life and the lives of my children. However, what I hope the committee understands and appreciates is the wide diversity of socio-political thought and action within Vermont's communities of color to address racism and White supremacy. And while we share the same goal to eradicate both evils our strategies and tactics differ.

Vermont Partnership for Fairness & Diversity

Aside from the Abenaki Nation, Vermont Partnership for Fairness & Diversity, chartered in 1995, is the oldest nonprofit organization in Vermont governed and managed by persons of color. Our current mission is to make Vermont an exceptional destination for all, particularly people of color. We believe Vermont's economic future and prosperity are directly tied to our collective ability to attract, provide experiences beyond expectations, and retain tourists, outdoor enthusiasts, convention goers, college students, entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists of color.

Fifteen years ago we embarked on a forty year *Vermont Vision for a Multicultural Future initiative* to make Vermont an exceptional destination for people of color. We launched, in collaboration with the Department of Tourism and Marketing, the Vermont African American Heritage Trail to attract tourists of colors and those interested in cultural tourism to the state; we provide critical information to people of color interested in relocating to Vermont for work, school, or retirement through www.iamavermonter.org; and educational programs for schools and communities.

Our annual Vermont Vision for a Multicultural Future Conference provides a unique educational forum where business, nonprofit, legislative, and executive leadership exchange promising practices that advance the practice of personal and institutional inclusion and equity. Admittedly our approach to growing Vermont's economy is grounded in reducing racist behavior, increasing diversity, and advancing inclusive and equitable practices.

Analysis of S.281

First let me state that Vermont Partnership fully supports the testimonies given by Rep. Kiah Morris of Bennington and Diana Wahle of the Community Equity Collaborative of Brattleboro. Second permit me to introduce two idioms to buttress our position on the proposed S.281.

In my former life as an international management development trainer and consultant, one of my clients was located in Bilma, Niger. For those of you unfamiliar with Bilma it is an oasis in the Sahara Desert. One evening sitting on top of an imposing sand dune a well-digger left me with this prophetic statement: "You cannot dig a new well by digging an old well deeper."

Let me repeat, "You cannot dig a new well by digging an old well deeper."

The manner in which Vermont, in general, the legislature, specifically, approaches controversial issues is as follows: create a board or commission, engage in research that leads to analysis paralysis, issue report with recommendations, then provide insufficient authority and responsibility and resources to implement or enforce recommendations.

The proposed Systemic Racism Mitigation Oversight and Equity Review Board exemplifies old well digging. The Vermont landscape is littered with reports on race, racism, and racial disparities. The old well assumes and focuses on the deficit. Old well thinking believes that if you point out what is wrong you can legislate leadership.

We want the legislature to avoid the idiomatic old well trap exemplified by the legislation that created the Racial Disparities in the Criminal and Juvenile Justice System Advisory Panel, S.54. With the exception of Section 3, the legislature failed to recognize the substantial work already underway by state law enforcement. It added very little to the body of work or knowledge already underway at the time, and left key stakeholders feeling as though the legislation had been jammed down throats.

The legislature has no intent to give the Systemic Racism Mitigation Oversight and Equity Review Board the operational responsibility, authority, or resources to implement courses of action beyond that of only making recommendations. To do so would impinge on the authority granted to agency/department heads.

We believe there is an opportunity for the legislature to build a new well focused on our assets and ask that you abandon the old well of deficit thinking and make-work. On December 15th 2017, the Attorney General and Human Rights Commission Taskforce on Act 54 – Racial Disparities in State Systems Report and Recommendations issued a series of recommendations requested by Section 3 of Act 54 that we believe should form the basis of S.281.

These recommendations were generated by 80 stakeholders from across the state of which the first three recommendations summarize the basis for building this new well:

1. Identify Vermont agencies/departments/commissions/councils, etc. that are currently engaged in affirmative efforts to address racial disparities.
2. Examine what these entities are doing and what is and is not working well.
3. Work to replicate what is working throughout state government.

There are already a small number of state agencies/departments/commissions etc. currently engaged in effective work to address racial disparities

The leaders of these agencies did not wait for legislation to tell them what to do. Their efforts were launched by visionary leaders in public safety, transportation and commerce. The irony is not lost on us that the current leadership of the four agencies/departments we consider doing great work come from the field of law enforcement: Sec. Flynn, Sec. Schirling, Commissioner Anderson, and Col. Birmingham, as well as Col. Batchelder of Fish & Wildlife. Efforts should focus on replicating what they do well throughout state government.

The recommendations also request that the Governor issue a series of executive orders requiring each agency and department to:

- Review, and where appropriate, utilize stakeholder suggestions for addressing racial disparities in each system identified in this Report
- Identify indicators and performance measures that are related to racial disparities in the agency's workforce and services that the entity provides to track as part of the Results Based Accountability (RBA) initiative;
- Have each agency/department identify an EEO officer who will oversee the work related to the performance measures;
- Require EEO officers to gather public input, particularly input from affected groups on an annual basis; and
- Have the EEO officers convene on at least an annual basis to review and revise the work, examine trends, etc. and report to the Chief Performance Officer and Joint Justice Legislative Oversight Committee on progress.

To create another board or commission seems superfluous when 80 stakeholders have offered a plan ready for implementation. All the plan requires is leadership. The Governor can task the Secretary of Administration to be the point agency for this initiative to reduce racial disparities.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer our views on the proposed S.281 legislation.