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The Honorable Jeanette K. White
Chair, Senate Committee on Government Operations
Vermont Legislature
Statehouse
Montpelier, Vermont

RE: Act 54

Dear Senator White and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with an update on work related to Act 54. The Human Rights Commission has been focused on the Section 3 requirements of the Act. That section required the Office of the Attorney General (AGO) together with the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and other interested stakeholders to come up with a strategy to address racial disparities across state systems including education, labor and employment, economic development, and access to housing and healthcare. On December 15, 2017, the HRC and the AGO submitted its report to Joint Legislative Justice Oversight Committee.¹

The report identifies documented racial disparities across all of these systems and recommends that the State prioritize initiatives to reduce and eliminate these racial disparities. The disparities include:

- ❖ Poverty: 11% of white residents are below the federal poverty limit compared with 22% of American Indians; 23% African-Americans; 15% of Latinos; 15% of Asians and 21% of people who identify as more than one race;
- ❖ Education: Students of color are subjected to high rates of harassment, have poorer health outcomes, and are more likely to be subjected to exclusionary discipline;
- ❖ Labor: People of color are 3.3% of the Vermont state workforce and 6.6% of new hires but voluntarily separate from employment at 2x the rate of white employees and are 3x more likely to be terminated;
- ❖ Housing: People of color experience higher rates of discrimination in the rental housing market and are less likely to be able to afford housing;

¹ <http://hrc.vermont.gov/sites/hrc/files/publications/2017-12-15%20Report%20and%20Recommendations%20Act%2054%20Final.pdf>

- ❖ Healthcare: People of color experience greater problems with access to healthcare and have poorer health outcomes;
- ❖ Economic Development: Minorities operate 3.3% of employer owned firms in Vermont. As the fastest growing demographic in Vermont, people of color present the greatest opportunity for increasing employer owned businesses and filling job vacancies.

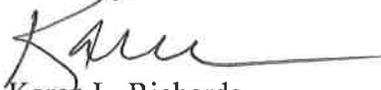
The adoption of indicators or benchmarks and performance measures by each state entity that can address existing disparities within that agency's purview, and a coordinated approach to data collection, sharing and reporting will result in improved conditions over time. In order to comprehensively address the disparities, all state agencies and departments must undertake a system-wide analysis of the ways in which state government actively or passively contributes to these disparities, collect data to determine our baseline, and set goals for reducing those disparities across all agencies and areas of service including recruitment, hiring, promotion and retention of employees of color; culturally and ethnically appropriate service provision, and education systems that provide culturally appropriate curriculum and address racial and socio-economic disparities in school discipline as well as bullying and harassment.

The report recommends tying this effort into the State's existing Results Based Accountability (RBA) process. In addition, it would be helpful to identify those agencies already working on efforts in this area and make sure those efforts are coordinated and working in tandem with one another rather than in silos. There are already existing task forces/committees looking at fair and impartial policing, health disparities, economic development opportunities for people of color, etc. In addition, the Governor's Council on Equity and Diversity in the Workplace could be charged with examining disparities in the recruitment, retention and termination rates of employees of color.

Accomplishing this will require designated leadership. Whether that is a commission or council or a single individual who is responsible for ensuring that it moves forward, what is clear is that the effort will fail in its absence.

As of 2016, people of color represent 5.4% of Vermont's population or 33,728 people. Latinos and Asians are the fastest growing demographics followed closely by African-Americans. More than half of these populations reside outside of Chittenden County. As the fastest growing demographic in the state, people of color have much to offer our state. To date, their contributions have limited by a majority white culture and both explicit and implicit bias. Only by taking active steps to address disparities can Vermont be the state it desires to be—one that offers and provides true equality of opportunity. State government must lead this effort.

Sincerely,



Karen L. Richards
Executive Director