

Testimony regarding H.608, Sec. 1 (a) (5), Sec. 3 (c) (8)

I am 72 years old. I moved back to Vermont, the state of my birth, at age 56. I live alone and am responsible for paying my own bills, and yet ever since I got back here, with a master's degree and professional work experience, I have been aware of a level of what I can only call age discrimination in employment, that now, 15 years later, seems to go hand in hand with the focus on attracting a 25-to-45 demographic to move here.

We read:

“Vermont population aging faster than nation,” Burlington Free Press.

Vermont is “an aging state with a low birth rate and stagnant population numbers,” VPR Retirees are a liability: they don't add to the income tax rolls, they cost more in healthcare.

We hear and read buzzwords such as “aging,” “graying,” “stagnant,” “declining,” and my favorite euphemism, “senior citizen,” often in the same sentence or paragraph describing Vermont as a place posed for disaster if someone doesn't do something.

Each time I read statements like the above in the media, I cringe. They're talking about me!

What I perceive is a widespread but unconscious bias against "gray heads" similar to the implicit racial bias noted in police officers, for example.

But it cuts deeper than that.

I am quite sensitized to being labeled as a liability to the state because of my age, which in turn limits my options for gainful employment to a handful of low-wage, menial positions.

Since returning to Vermont, my employment options have been limited to the gig economy, toggling between seasonal, part-time and temporary jobs, because that's what was available. I was a SCSEP trainee with Vermont Associates, but that is an inadequate program: restricted to 20 hours/week at minimum wage, no side jobs allowed, and limited to a year. At the end of it, you're back on the street, basically.

The truth about the so-called “senior” demographic is that many of us still need to work to support ourselves to supplement social security or some other income in order to pay our bills, and this is going to be the case into the future with the threat of raising the age of eligibility for social security and also just the cost of living.

I speak not only for myself but for others I know. This hits single women especially hard.

There are five categories of older worker: the worker who has been with a company or government for years; the business owner; the self-employed; the worker in a family business; and the worker who is constantly in the job market due to some past misfortune, such as downsizing or business closure. When I look around at workplaces that do employ the latter as a policy, I see greeters at Walmart, cashiers at the supermarkets and dollar stores, housekeepers, housecleaners, caregivers, and retail clerks. The menial, minimum-wage jobs that younger, better-educated workers reject.

To assume that the increase in that age group in Vermont is a death knell to the labor force is not based in fact, and yet it has become the mantra of state government hand-in-hand with the Vermont Chamber of Commerce, to have everyone believe that Vermont is on the skids because the labor force is aging.

To address Vermont's “aging population problem,” the state must begin by addressing attitude and media representations, from which policy and public opinion spring.

What are the negative stereotypes that pop up around the older person? Needy; poor; incapable; early dementia; poor health; societal burden; can't take care of themselves; in the way;

technologically challenged; slow, etc. These stereotypes all play a part in whether that older person lands or keeps employment.

Stereotypes work in reverse as well. As I have experienced, certain people didn't seem to understand why I was struggling financially, because in their mind I should have been either heading up my own business or well up the career ladder, if not at the top.

You may even hear these stereotypes uttered in the workplace or social settings. I don't think I am being oversensitive when I note that professional males in the 25-40 age bracket seem to take me less seriously, to the point of actually shoddy treatment.

In short, the 55-and-up age bracket needs to have employment opportunities. But even there, you run into an attitude which says that you don't really have to work, you're just doing this to get out of the house, right? (And I looked at the well-dressed gentleman and didn't say anything, but he quickly backed down from that statement. My job paid \$10/hour, no benefits, involved an hour commute one-way, and required being on my feet for seven hours. I was 62, cobbling together two other part-time gigs. The other women in the same workplace were both older and younger than I was.)

That leads to four recommendations.

One is that the state should be explicitly encouraging employers to employ people that are older than the target demographic. I remember the old campaign, "Hire the Handicapped."

Second, the state should be overtly encouraging employers to employ Vermont people, who are already here, who regardless of their age have already put into the system and are deserving if not entitled to get something back in the form of a livelihood.

The third issue is age discrimination, which is alive and well, especially toward older women. As is done with fair housing notices in the media, notices in the help wanted columns should remind employers that discrimination on the basis of age is against the law. When I called the Attorney General recently to ask how one might file a complaint of age discrimination, the assistant AG, Emily Adams, told me Vermont law does not specify age, it only refers to child workers under 18. Apparently she either did not know the federal law, which prohibits discrimination over the age of 40, or she did not care to mention it.

A retired teacher applies for work in the food industry as a server and learns from other workers that that employer hires only younger women. The same older woman applies at another restaurant and the owner asks how old she is, can she carry heavy trays, and would she like to go to the movies?

When I mentioned to my cousin, who is over 70 and has worked in government, that I was jobhunting, he said bluntly, "You'll never get hired. You're too old."

Terms such as "fast-paced," "multitasking," in job postings all signal to the older worker that he or she is not going to be a "good fit," no matter what his or her experience, ability or talent might be. We know the message, and it is very disheartening.

As with the disabled, state law should provide that the employer make a "reasonable accommodation" for an older worker, such as allowing short breaks, providing a place to sit at a register, hiring for positions that do not require lifting heavy objects or strenuous activity (rather than rejecting the application or firing the worker for non-performance), acknowledgement of any health issues, longer time to complete tasks if necessary, and other forms of accommodation.

Thank you,
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