

To: Members of the House Human Services Committee, Vermont State Legislature
From: Nancy Gallagher, historian and independent scholar, author of *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State* (1999)
Date: February 2, 2010

I am thankful for the opportunity to present my thoughts at your meeting concerning Joint House Resolution J.R.H. 32 expressing regret for the sterilization of Vermonters pursuant to the Sterilization Act of 1931. I have reviewed the proposed resolution and have some suggestions. Having studied the history of the eugenics movement in Vermont for 15 years and having had the opportunity for the last 10 years to learn about the experiences of many Vermonters whose families were investigated by the Eugenics Survey and who suffered both physically and spiritually as a result, I feel that our state is long overdue in confronting this chapter of our history.

I am grateful to those men and women whose families were investigated by the Eugenics Survey and who shared with me their knowledge and the heart-wrenching experiences of their lives and that of their relatives. From them, I have learned that their greatest hope is:

1. To **learn the truth** about what happened to their parents, grandparents, and extended family, thereby reclaiming their history and heritage.
2. To **restore to public consciousness the history** eugenics in Vermont and the results of the assaults on families and individuals through sterilization or segregation in state institutions.
3. **Feel safe and unafraid.** Many fear retribution if they tell what happened, or exploitation by the media, the public, or others trying to capitalize on their suffering for personal gain.

I feel that any resolution passed by the legislature acknowledging the injustice and abuse suffered by those families target for extinction via eugenics measures should:

1. **Be clear and explicit about the purpose and intent of the resolution.**
Who are we apologizing to and exactly for what?
2. **Recognize the continuing impact** of the eugenics program and sterilization law on the families and descendants of those affected, acknowledging that many families who suffered loss of family members (through institutionalization, adoption or foster placement), dispersal or destruction of kinship networks, and the repression and/or erasure of their identity, history and culture. **Does this resolution recognize their pain?**
3. Remain clearly **separate from any other legislative or political agendas.**
My experience with the issues concerning eugenics records and my connections with professionals in the field of eugenics historical records nationally has made me keenly aware of the **potential for misuse** of any documentation collected on families for

eugenics research by various people, some well-meaning and others not, who expose these individuals or their relatives to further injury through unwanted public exposure, which can undermine the well-being and healing of those affected. For example, some mistakenly believe that the IQ scores, the judgments of welfare workers or physicians recorded in the case files are true and accurate, when in fact they cannot be, by present scientific and medical knowledge. Others simply want to exploit the families to further other political, professional, or personal agendas.

4. Be **historically accurate**.
5. **Show good faith** by addressing the issues of those affected by including a proposal to redress the needs of those directly affected by eugenic interventions, while protecting their well-being and respecting their right to privacy on personal matters.

For clarity and historical accuracy the following changes in the content of the proposed bill should be made:

1. The most intensively studied families in the Eugenics Survey “Pedigrees,” whom the Eugenics Survey and the Department of Public Welfare used to promote a sterilization law were of mixed racial ancestry, identified as “French-Indian” or “French-Indian and Negro.” These extended families were documented as having lived in Vermont for 6-8 generations, as long as records had been kept since statehood. They were NOT Irish and Italian immigrants (who were included in the sociological study of Burlington’s ethnic communities in the 1930s published as *We Americans: A Study of Cleavage in an American City*, by Elin Anderson in 1937).
2. In the Vermont Commission on Country Life, organized by Henry Perkins and chaired by Governor John Weeks, the Eugenics Survey served as “The Committee on the Human Factor.” Their final report, *Rural Vermont: A Program for the Future* (1931) was promoted throughout the state as a blueprint for town and state planning. Vermonters were divided into two groups: “The People,” who were urged to study their family history with pride in ancestry and have many children, and “The Handicapped,” those families who were documented in the Eugenics Survey pedigree files as families characterized by “pauperism and feeble-mindedness,” who should be under constant oversight by state and local authorities and for whom sterilization was suggested.
3. The Eugenics Survey of Vermont, organized and directed by UVM professor Henry F. Perkins, was a privately-funded enterprise, whose eugenics-inspired research on Vermont families were conducted in partnership with the Vermont Children’s Aid Society, the Vermont Department of Public Welfare, and personnel in state institutions, most notably Brandon School for the Feeble-minded, the Waterbury State Hospital, Vermont Industrial School in Vergennes, and the Riverside Reformatory for Women in Rutland. Field workers made use of records and testimony from town officials, teachers, ministers, neighbors, and law enforcement officers, and children aid workers. Their studies were used to lobby for all forms of eugenics legislation and propagandize throughout the state

that Vermont needed to prevent propagation of so-called “unfit” or “undesirable” families. The harm done to families who were used for this end, through fomenting prejudice, encouraging state intervention and break-up of families, and labeling children as inferior or “suspected feeble-minded” can never be fully redressed or understood by those living today. Because eugenics falsely condemned their ancestral heritage and all of their descendants to the stigma of “genetic inferiority,” these families have suffered great harm. Aside from sexual sterilizations performed on family members, these families have suffered loss of family through separating children from their parents, loss of family history and loss of cultural identity. This historical fact is not recognized in this bill as it is currently written.

4. **Sterilizations were not halted when the Eugenics Survey closed in 1936!** In the 1930s and 1940s, the Vermont Department of Public Welfare and state institutions continued the eugenical studies of families and exercised measures of social and reproductive control, including implementation of the sterilization law. The case files on individuals who were sterilized and families who were broken up and their children placed in institutions or foster care remain (if they still exist) are not open to the public, protected by confidentiality statutes. Hence the actual history of the sterilization program in Vermont has never been written. This gap in historical understanding should be delegated to the Agency on Human Services. (see attached reports of The Board for Control of Mental Defectives, 1942-44).
5. I think many of the “Whereas” clauses in this draft resolution can be summarized into a few clear general statements that emphasize the above points and do away with extraneous information that tends to confuse the issue. Also, avoid the term “pseudoscience.” It implies that real scientists knew better. Instead, historians of the subject prefer to use the term “discredited science.” Unfortunately eugenics was considered a credible science in its day, supported by most leaders in the field of human genetics, including several Nobel Prize winners in biology. Moreover, eugenics has never really gone away, it has just assumed new forms.