



Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council

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Testimony before the House Committee on General, Housing and Military Affairs

Regarding Joint Resolution H. 7

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For the record, my name is Kirsten Murphy and I am the Executive Director of Vermont's Developmental Disabilities Council. I am joined today by my colleague Max Barrows, who is the Outreach Director for Green Mountain Self-Advocates. DD Councils were created by federal law and serve in each state and territory. Our goal is to ensure that public policy supports citizens with developmental disabilities to live meaningful lives of their own choice in inclusive communities.

Thank you for the invitation to speak with you about Joint Resolution H. 7 sincerely apologizing and expressing sorrow and regret to all individual Vermonters and their families who were harmed as a result of State sanctioned eugenics policies and practices.

It is important that Vermont and the General Assembly take responsibility for this very troubling chapter in our state's history. As I know you are aware, eugenics is a pseudo-science rooted in racism and ableism that purported to improve humanity by practices that would cause certain groups of people to have higher birth rates than other groups of people. Here in Vermont, these efforts ranged from promoting increased family size for farmers of white European descent to marriage restrictions and the outright sterilization of people with disabilities, the poor, people of color, and members of the Abenaki tribes. In adopting Acts and Resolves No. 174 in 1931, the Vermont General Assembly created a legal path to a documented 253 sterilizations. Although the procedures were said to be voluntary, in practice, they were not. At the Brandon Training School for the Feeble Minded, for example, people with developmental disabilities were required to undergo sterilization as a condition for their release into the community.

Thankfully, the science of genetics has advanced well beyond the simplistic notion that genes determine human behavior and account for social constructs like race. But sadly, we have made less progress toward renouncing the attitudes that gave rise to eugenics in the first place. Here I will focus my comments on disability, though similar things can be said about the other groups targeted by the eugenics movement.

One reason to make this long overdue apology, is the fact that ableism is still very much at work in Vermont.

To take one example, in all categories surveyed – heart disease, cancer, diabetes, asthma -- the Vermont Department of Health has found that people with disabilities are twice as likely to experience these illnesses.¹ For context, reducing the rates of chronic conditions, which are diseases that are persistent and long lasting, is one of three key metrics that Vermont has been asked to improve by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS) through its health reform efforts, also known as the All Payer Accountable Care Model. Ninety percent of Vermonters with disabilities have at least one chronic condition and two-thirds of adults with a disability have two or more chronic conditions. This is almost three times as often as adults without a disability (23%). Given how important these metrics are, you would think that healthcare for people with disabilities would be top-of-mind.

To be clear, the increased incidence of disease in people with disabilities has – in almost all cases -- nothing to do with disability triggering such conditions, but everything to do with what society judges to be important for people with disabilities. Research indicates that doctors are less likely to refer patients with disabilities for routine screenings or to counsel people with disabilities about sexual health, diet, and health behaviors like exercise. One in five adults with a disability do not get the emotional support they need.² Rates of depression are three times higher for Vermonters with disabilities.³ Among people with intellectual disabilities, marriage is the exception and becoming a parent remains rare. The attitudes that underlie these facts are not far removed from those that drove state sponsored eugenics policies: Some lives are more valuable than others. Some groups should procreate; others should not.

While a necessary first step, to be truly meaningful, this apology should raise questions about how, as a State, we do or do not truly support the groups targeted by eugenics in the 1920's and 1930's. I note that when the University of Vermont issued a similar statement of apology, President E. Thomas Sullivan promised to provide ongoing educational initiatives aimed at ensuring that “such a grave injustice never be repeated.” JRH.7 provides a similar opportunity for self-reflection and public education.

Last fall, Representative John Killacky suggested to the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council that disability must be on the agenda in every legislative committee. Whether it is in housing, public transportation, healthcare, human services, building codes, or criminal justice, the disability community is underserved and struggling. I hope this Joint Resolution brings you a step closer to considering the many other ways Vermont can address these inequities.

¹<https://gmcboard.vermont.gov/sites/gmcb/files/The%20Health%20of%20Vermonters%20Living%20with%20Disabilities.pdf>, pages 41-54.

² Ibid., page 37.

³ Ibid., page 51.