

Written testimony regarding **J.R.H.7** *"Joint resolution apologizing and expressing sincere condolences to all Vermonters and their families who were harmed as a result of State-sanctioned and eugenically inspired sterilization"*

Submitted to the Vermont House Committee on General, Housing and Military Affairs
Chair Rep. Thomas Stevens
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The work of the sponsoring Representatives and members of the Committee in drafting and considering J.R.H.7 is much appreciated. In addition to the elected members, the contributions of witnesses and commentators have brought perspective and insight to the deliberations. This is an essential aspect of the public legislative process, imbuing it with the humanizing testimony of individual lived experience. I offer this testimony in that spirit, to add a broadened understanding of the circumstances at hand. While the methods of the eugenical programs under examination herein were directed at several disparate population categories to achieve their goals, one such specific target were the indigenous Abenaki, marked as "degenerate," with their numbers consequently intended to be reduced. The Committee has taken direct testimony to this point.

There has been some conversation about the need for this Resolution to clearly acknowledge the gravitas of the "big picture" – the context in which the referenced actions took place. The state-sanctioned eugenical policies that are called out in J.R.H.7, with particular respect to the Abenaki People, do not stand alone as a single historical example of oppression. Rather, they were and are a part of a broad, systemic set of institutionalized attitudes and initiatives deployed since before the beginnings of this State, both explicitly and implicitly.

Not limited to Vermont, these systemic policies were and are shared widely, certainly nationally, as part of the process of colonization. Colonization is, itself, also not a discrete historical point or period in time, as its values, intentions, and effects continue in the present. It is a process, not an event. Hence, it is the ongoing and complex nature of this overarching phenomenon that informs this Resolution in the minds and hearts of the Abenaki People.

It is in this context of fundamental marginalization, discrimination, displacement, and disavowal of an entire group of people – the original inhabitants of this very landscape – that we have a definition of ethnocide. Ethnocide refers to the systematic extermination of a given social culture, undesirable in the eyes of the protagonists, and is in fact just one tool in a broader process of genocide. In the case of eugenical policies enforced against the Abenaki people, not only were targeted individuals and families faced with sterilization, but also the ability of an already-overtly-threatened social group to affirm its culture was drastically obstructed.

Those future generations that were the inheritors and perpetuators of this ancestral legacy were eliminated preemptively, and the survivors were forced into concealing their identity out of self-protection. The shared practice and free transfer of cultural knowledge, to the degree it had survived centuries of oppression – language, customs, technologies, spirituality, histories, and the like – was summarily interrupted and impaired. Not only are the effects of that cultural disruption felt to this day, with loss of knowledge and continuity, but the resultant generational trauma continues to instill fear and distrust of institutional and governmental authorities.

I would encourage the Committee to make some honest acknowledgement of this context and these ongoing implications. There should be an explicit recognition that these eugenically-driven actions are part of a policy pattern that is extensive, institutionalized, chronic, and protracted with continuing deleterious effects. In the case of the Abenaki, the General Assembly's adoption of 1931 Acts and Resolves No. 174, 15 "An Act for Human Betterment By Voluntary Sterilization" was symptomatic of a much deeper and persistent set of prejudicial practices that we, as a State, are only now beginning to face.

Following the acknowledgement of that context – and I have heard affirmation of positive intentions toward this end from several Members – there should be further resolve to address that broad dynamic of disenfranchisement. The possible additional language offered by Legislative Counsel Michael Chernick (found under Committee Documents for Feb. 19, 2020) might be a good starting place. "Resolved: That the General Assembly recognizes that further legislative action should be taken to address the continuing impact of State-sanctioned eugenics policies and practices." I might suggest the substitution at "practices" of "related practices of disenfranchisement and ethnocide, leading to genocide." This would likely take the future forming of what is known as a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Such a step has been taken, to at least some degree, by the State of Maine (alone among the United States), and the national governments of South Africa, Chile, Nepal, and Canada, among others.

Thank you for your consideration and commitment to this work. I look forward to being of service, with the Native community, in forwarding this process of honoring, healing, and renewal.