

Thank you!

My name is Breck Knauft and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps.

I am here to speak in support of H.533.

I am hopeful my remarks today help inform your work on this bill, especially regarding the needs of the young workforce here in Vermont. Further, as one of the literal “boots on the ground” youth and young adult employment organizations in the state, I want to tell you about the exciting work VYCC is tackling in 2019 and how it directly connect with this bill’s priorities.

I will start by offering some 30,000’ observations before addressing four main areas of the bill where I see VYCC being able to help make this bill successful.

It’s encouraging to see the level of focus—and the creative solutions—workforce development is receiving from this committee and the legislature. I see similar efforts playing out across the state, and to see people in leadership positions rowing in the same direction is encouraging.

As the committee continues to draft this bill, I would ask you to consider the opportunity that the summer months provide. It can be a time when students – future workers – fall behind...or, leap ahead. As Vermont deliberates how to invest funds toward a stronger workforce, let’s look for opportunities to have summer work and training opportunities enhance what happens during the school year. Respectfully, I don’t see this key concept in this bill.

At risk of being forward, I’ve drafted language that I believe can be helpful here. “Employers and training providers are highly encouraged to develop summer training programs that align with secondary and post-secondary education. This will help participants gain real world experience that compliments and builds upon what they learn during the school year.” Without this thinking, we’re crafting a plan that is focused on just 75% of the calendar year.

I would also encourage the committee to look for ways to spend dollars that train people to develop skills pertinent to some of Vermont’s most pressing challenges such as climate change, affordability, and environmental. There are many ways this bill could help address these issues through our workforce. Take for example, the current bills’ focus on weatherization. It’s great to include this forward oriented industry in this bill. And, trying to align training with Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA) youth is also good. But, why limit to weatherization? VYCC can put young people on solar installation crews. What about water quality? Basic Carpentry? Expanding this area of the bill in ways that the workforce can be ready to address the issues most pressing for future Vermonters helps accomplishes many of the goals of the legislature this session.

I’ve pivoted to the specific content of the bill. I’ll continue in this vein.

Advancement Grant Program

1. Page 6, line 11: It was unclear WHO the corporation is. I understand this is VSAC. If VYCC offered trainings and certifications, we – and other partners – can benefit from this Advancement Grant Program. As a general observation, I support a shift that has partners and providers being eligible for funding, not just employers. Expanding potential partners program will expand the reach to all eligible Vermonters.

Workforce Committee

2. Page 9, line 15: I think there may be an opportunity to include the nonprofit sector a bit more here. As I review this list, I don't see language in here that speaks to the seasonality of the lives of young workers.

Targeted Communities in Need

3. Page 16, line 5: I'll share similar observations to the previous comment. I also want to highlight that VYCC has worked a great deal with the New American Community.

I see great opportunities in each of these areas of the bill and look forward to doing our part as an organization to help the state take these ideas into action for the future workforce we work with everyday.

Update on 2019 Programs

In October of 2018, VYCC was fortunate to receive state appropriated funds - \$100K per year for three years. We are showing our gratitude for this investment by immediately putting it to good use to directly serve young Vermonters in more effective ways this year and for years to come.

So far we have:

Hired a Recruitment and Member Services Manager – Nora Woolf now leads recruitment efforts and oversees the educational and alumni services we provide Corps Members. This new position has increased our capacity to more young Vermonters who can be successful at VYCC, *and* those who stand to benefit the most, such as low-income youth.

Here are some of our 2019 stats so far from recruitment:

We will hire about 280 people this summer – A mix of Crew Members and Crew Leaders.

To date our recruitment has drawn in:

- 294 applications
- 55% or 161 are VTers
- 45% or 129 are from outside VT – most of these are young adults, over 18. Note: all youth (15-18) positions are for VTers.
- 13% POC (an increase)
- 15% LGBTQ and/or Trans or Non-Binary (also an increase)

We are actively building referrals with those who work with low-income and at-risk youth and young people across the state. Quantifiable numbers on these apps are hard to track at this stage of the process. Once hired, we are able to legally and with consent, assess income status.

Nora is also focused on tracking program outcomes that include among many things: how VYCC is helping to attract and retain young talent for our workforce; VYCC's ability to increase the social diversity of those pursuing outdoor sector and agricultural jobs; and creating meaningful first-time jobs for those not pursuing college. All our data tracking this year will inform our improvements and expansion during the 2020 season.

This position is also focused on connecting Corps Members with opportunities after their VYCC experience, be it with prospective employers or educational institutions. This key follow up, 6 or 12 months after a VYCC season, ensures that young people are truly set up to transition seamlessly into the workforce or their next learning step toward a career that is meaningful and fruitful.

Hired a Chief Program Officer – VYCC has hired Daniel Schmidt in the role of Chief Program Officer. This is a new position for VYCC and strengthens our ability to design and implement programs that align with the needs and priorities of Vermont. Central to this work, is the need to forge partnerships with state, federal, and NGO partners. On this note, he and I met with Sarah Buxton last week and we continue see many opportunities to partner with VT DOL.

Programmatic Adjustments – VYCC continues to invest in the quality of programming we offer young Vermonters. To increase capacity we are making significant investments in programs. We are also shifting funding to increase the quality and quantity of trainings we are providing all members of the VYCC community – staff, Crew Leaders, and Corps Members. These trainings will take place throughout the year, not just during the traditional program season.

- **Workforce/Career Readiness Training**
 - o **GOAL** – create a pathway for employment, post-secondary education
 - CMs leave VYCC inspired for that next step and we can do more to help them reach that goal
 - In partnership with CCV, Corps Members will get 8 hours of employment preparation workshops: that will help them create a resume and cover letter. Further, they will receive a letter of recommendation from their Crew Leaders.

- **Essential Skills for Tomorrow's Leaders**
 - o **GOAL** – Continue to address the education needs of Vermont students by focusing on the intersection of what VYCC does well and where schools and students need additional resources
 - o Environmental Literacy, Personal Finance, Wellness (including nutrition, mental health), and Essential Skills (leadership, effective communication, etc.)
 - o New Crew Leader trainings – In partnership with Centerpoint, we can help Crew Leaders meet needs of Corps Members from wide range of backgrounds who all bring differing perspectives to VYCC crews. With training and direction, Crew Leaders can harness diversity to form powerful teams. Lacking training, Crew Leaders can find themselves unprepared for difficult conversations on bias, prejudice, and more in the modern workplace.

- **Bringing Value to Educational Institutions...Where Schools Need Us**
 - The work part of VYCC
 - o Provides work/life experiences out of the classroom that can help a student achieve proficiencies within their personalized learning plan (PLP)
 - We do this by working with work-based learning coordinators, teachers, districts, and AOE to create pathways for students to further pursue their PLP's outside of the classroom

- We help students document their VYCC experience so that it translates into what they are doing in the classroom
- The education part of VYCC
 - Provide an out-of-classroom experience that aligns with state standards
 - Provide opportunities to practice transferrable skills in many different situations
 - Provide curriculum related to personal finance and wellness. Schools often lack the resources to address these essential life skills

Next, a note about the Minimum Wage. Last, late last year, I spoke with Senator Balint about Minimum Wage legislation. I shared with her that...

Minimum Wage

I applaud the efforts to reduce income inequality and offer a livable wage. However, I'd ask the committee to understand the impact this could have on VYCC.

We pay every Corps Member. Wages are a significant portion of our budget and if there are increases that outpace inflation, then that becomes harder to sustain and I worry that, ultimately, it means fewer VYCC opportunities for youth and young adults.

Final Thoughts

Finally, it is important to note any and all support VYCC receives from the legislature is matched many times over with philanthropic support. This year we have established an Impact and Opportunity Fund. With \$750,000 of new philanthropic revenues committed to this fund in 2019, it marks a new chapter for VYCC. And, we expect to grow this fund in the coming years. Please note these funds are restricted for new program activities and infrastructure that enhance state funding, but are in no ways duplicative.

As you can hear, VYCC is dreaming big, but planning smart. In partnership with the state and many others, we look forward to being part of building a strong future workforce for Vermont.

Thank you again for your support.

Breck Knauft