



Vermont Partnership

FOR FAIRNESS AND DIVERSITY

**Testimony before the Senate Government Operations Committee
Regarding Prop 2: Declaration of rights, prohibiting slavery
31 January 2019**

For the record my name is Curtiss Reed, Jr. and I serve as the executive director of Vermont Partnership for Fairness & Diversity whose mission is to make Vermont the most desirable destination for people of color. I also serve as chair of the Vermont State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. Due to the government shutdown our committee was unable to meet this month and issue a statement concerning the proposed changes to amend Vermont's constitution. Finally, I am the co-creator of the Vermont African American Heritage Trail in collaboration with the Vermont Department of Tourism & Marketing.

Although no one from our organization is a constitutional law expert, we fully support the proposed changes to strike language from Article One in the constitution that legalizes slavery for residents up to the age of 21. While we fully recognize the social and moral arguments in support of Prop 2 our optic is through an economic lens.

Our work at Vermont Partnership and the Vermont African American Heritage Trail resides at the unusual confluence of marketing, workforce development, and civic engagement. Every time a government official, public figure, business, corporation, or even an ordinary resident states that Vermont was the first state to abolish slavery in its constitution, they speak a half-truth. Functionally speaking our organizational efforts introduce Vermont to the rapidly expanding marketplace of black and brown consumers nationwide, be they outdoor enthusiasts, college students, retirees, entrepreneurs, tourists, or venture capitalists. We strongly believe in truth in advertising—and every time the prohibition of slavery half-truth is told, our job becomes more challenging.

On the one hand, Vermont needs to grow its population and we believe that our future economic growth and prosperity is directly tied to our ability to attract people of color beyond our borders to Vermont, provide them an experience that exceeds their expectations, and extend an invitation for them to stay. Among the usual reasons like clean air, clean water, beautiful landscape, and living life on a human scale, recruiters also pitch the first state to abolish slavery to folks of color. Many folks of color considering a move are disappointed when they learn that the pitch delivered by white human resource personnel was only partially true. That sets up the inevitable question of what else might not be true about the pitch to move to Vermont. And to tell the truth that our constitution condones child slavery is a non-starter for a sales pitch.

Last fall the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, an organization that assists municipalities recruit employees, passed a resolution at their annual meeting advocating for changes in Article One.

On the other hand, the Vermont African American Heritage Trail seeks to increase the civic engagement of Vermont's marginalized populations. Efforts to educate Vermonters, particularly school children, on the civic engagement of African American historic figures such as Alexander Twilight, Daisy Turner, Lucy Terry Prince, Pullman Porters, Vermont veterans of the 54th Mass. Regiment, and other historic figures of color encourage the next generations of Vermonters of all social identities to engage in our democracy. As our future workforce, we want Vermont students, particularly students of color, to be proud enough of their state to remain here after graduation or to return here after their post-secondary studies elsewhere. Students are conditioned to believe the veracity of the material taught them by educators. Unfortunately, our educators have been teaching the half-truth of abolishing slavery in our constitution.

At their annual meeting last October members of the Vermont Superintendents' Association and Vermont School Board Association were surprised to learn that our constitution condoned child slavery. And, like the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, I believe, passed resolutions to strip the caveat to the prohibition of slavery in Article One.

Vermont needs to grow its population and strengthen its economy. We believe one variable in the complicated calculus to achieve these twin goals is the removal of child slavery from Article One. This would lead to more truthful marketing and hopefully civic education that inspires our youth to remain.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share our views with your committee today.