



Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council

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Comments on H. 96 the Truth and Reconciliation Bill

Dear Chair Stevens and all members of the House General, Housing, and Military Affairs Committee,

Thank you for inviting the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council to comment on and participate in shaping H. 96.

I want to begin by thanking you for your successful work on the Eugenics Apology Resolution. That important acknowledgement of the harm done by legislators through their acts of legislation ended here:

Resolved: That the General Assembly recognizes that further legislative action should be taken to address the continuing impact of State-sanctioned eugenics policies and related practices of disenfranchisement, ethnocide, and genocide.

The Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council's 2022 Legislative Platform includes the legislature taking such further actions and we thought that H. 96 was going to be the vehicle to launch such further action.

However, H. 96 is not that vehicle. It is not centered on eugenics and it is not centered on legislators. It creates a process for people other than legislators to hear about injuries caused by people other than legislators.

The apology issued by legislators, for the actions of prior legislators, was a commendable act of institutional responsibility.

Next steps should continue the Legislature's ownership of the harms eugenics laws and policies unleashed in Vermont.

H.96

Turning now to H. 96 – in its current iteration, I want to begin by thanking you for adding people who were targeted by eugenics on account of their mental or physical condition or the mental or physical condition of a family member within the scope of H. 96. The original omission was rather unfortunate.

In general, the people I've discussed H. 96 with would like to see a process to gather information – peoples' truths and experiences- that is centered on the Legislature and on eugenics. Centered on the harms caused by legislators – by laws and policies. Centered on the harms even very well-meaning legislators set in motion.

The reaction to H. 96 from the DD Council's Public Policy Committee is that it is unworkably overbroad, very expensive, and seems to have little to do with eugenics.

In observing your Committee's public-facing discussions, I have heard several repeated themes and questions and would like to address some of them here.

Who is this process for? Who are the sharers and who are the listeners?

Perhaps a Commission of current and former legislators from every County could be convened to conduct the kind of listening tours and outreach done in Maine – accessible to every community of people impacted by eugenics laws. Impacted by the policies, surveys, institutions, sterilizations and all other harms.

Perhaps the Joint Fiscal Office could hire a contractor to help organize the process and archive it properly and provide opportunities for people to share with or without their information becoming publicly available.

Key is Legislators are the listeners – and the processors of the damage done. People want to share their stories with legislators and be paid attention to by legislators. It matters a lot when people are allowed to testify at the Statehouse. It is hard to get in. It is hard to be heard and listened to – as if your story matters. The people who testified to your committee in support of the eugenics apology while it was under consideration felt heard and witnessed.

If current legislators heard the stories of their neighbors it might lead them to want to remediate some of the harms caused. It is not right that 30 years after the closing of the Brandon Training School, adults with disabilities do not have the necessary services and housing to live independently in their communities. The work force that supports people with disabilities has been underpaid and undervalued for decades.

Perhaps if legislators heard the true-life stories of people with disabilities and their families in their communities, they would find it easier to give the direct support professionals a living wage.

Perhaps for people with disabilities, this is where reparations begin.

One Commission? Three Commissions?

People in the disability community do not like the idea of three separate commissions or processes. The issue for people with disabilities is that in addition to their disability – they also have a race and a gender identity and cannot separate their life experiences based on their race or disability. As Max Barrows said - things happen to him as a black man AND a man with a disability – not as a black man or a man with a disability. He is always both /and at the same time.

A gay man with a disability on the DD Council's Policy Committee had a similar reaction: He said, " when someone is mean or rude to me or doesn't treat me the way I want to be treated- I don't know if it is because I am gay or because I have a disability. I don't want to slice and dice myself to try and figure it out."

I have not heard anyone in the disability community speak in support or need of a separate process in which to share their truths. Instead, there is interest in a unified process. One person on the Policy Committee said he wanted other groups to hear his story and he wanted to learn theirs.

A million-dollar commission?

The priorities of the disability community for state spending this year and for the foreseeable future include supporting a living wage for the Home and Community-based workforce that supports people with disabilities to live independently in their communities.

A second priority is to fund new service-supported housing for people with developmental disabilities. Also, the House Human Services Committee is supporting adding much needed positions at DAIL for housing and quality assurance.

The cost of the structure as presented to date is of concern in light of the above pressing needs for a stable workforce and services sufficient to support people in their communities, as opposed to institutions.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments and for your work on these important issues.

Best,
Susan Aranoff