



The Vermont Professionals of Color Network

February 4, 2022

House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

On behalf of the Vermont Professionals of Color Network (VT PoC), I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on behalf of our member network on the issue of racial and social equity in economic opportunity and cultural empowerment. First, I'd like to introduce our organization. VT PoC is a state-wide organization that is built on the desire to help BIPOC and People of the Global Majority living in this state to advance their prosperity in whatever way they choose to define the word; whether it be economic, cultural or social prosperity. Our goal is to be the conduit in which the water (or resources) flow to the people.

We believe that systems that are failing communities of color fail the entire state. Our goal is to eliminate the economic and professional gaps that exist as a result of systemic racism, because prosperity starts with opportunities to climb the economic ladder. We are constantly striving for a new era of professional mobility, promoting entrepreneurial ventures, and nurturing our community by creating safe spaces for connections within the community and through networking, education and advocacy. Specifically, we work to empower youth, support entrepreneurs, and promote personal and professional development within the BIPOC community. We believe that creating environments in which People of the Global Majority feel a sense of belonging is critical to this work, because it has implications on the future of this state. As such, I am grateful to be sharing the perspective of the Network on H.406 with this committee today.

The state of Vermont is home to over 65,000 Black, Indigenous, Peoples of Color and People of the Global Majority as of the most recent US census. That is an increase of about 120% over the 2010 census. The bill noted that BIPOC individuals in this state are on average younger compared to whites. We WANT to be here and it's a hopeful sign that this number continues to

grow, but it also makes me think of all of my friends with promising careers who have left this state because they didn't feel like they belonged, because it is hard to live in this state as a BIPOC individual due to the historical and systemic racism that was noted in H.406.

BIPOC and People of the Global Majority have not had access to the same privileges as white individuals in terms of generational wealth but also in terms of the generational knowledge that that wealth can purchase. For example, BIPOC businesses have asked us to create a playbook of how to start a business because there is no generational knowledge for this. Access to the resources, in all forms of that word, is critical to the empowerment and advancement of BIPOC and People of the Global Majority in this state.

What does access look like? Here, I refer to a definition of access adapted from public health literature. We can frame access as having six critical components (Pechansky and Thomas, 1981):

1. Accessibility: in terms of physical and temporal accessibility
2. Affordability: in terms of cost
3. Availability: in terms of quantity
4. Acceptability: in terms of the whether a resource is acceptable in quality to the receiver
5. Accommodation: in terms of whether the provider accommodates the needs of the receiver to access
6. Awareness: the knowledge of the resource

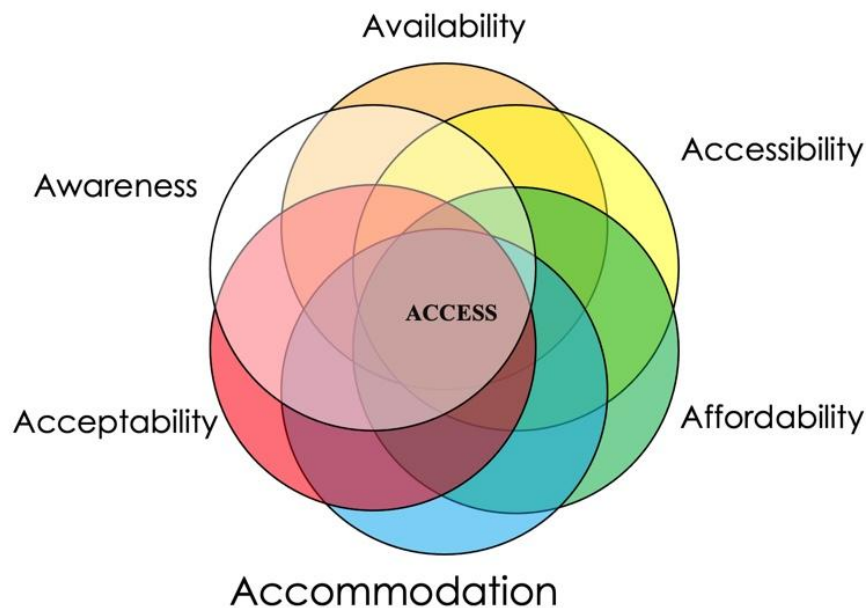


Figure 1. Adapted from the Pechansky and Thomas (1981) dimensions of access.

When one component is missing, such as affordability, accessibility is difficult, sometimes impossible. For the BIPOC community, access has been denied historically, structurally, in all the ways it can be. As you are all considering this bill, please consider that to offer access to these resources, whether that is personal safety, professional or personal development, grants, land access, cultural arts, please consider the current realities of denied access for the BIPOC community and how this bill might help to address these gaps.

I'd like to share some of personal and Network member experiences of this denial of access.

I grew in South Burlington, Vermont. In a recent forum, I spoke about how my school counselor never provided information about the PSAT testing dates or the fact that these test results could lead to merit scholarships. In that same forum, a colleague of mine noted that her Black son in a different school district was also not offered information about his PSATs from his counselor. In my case, the counselor assumed that because I am Asian, I had access to the knowledge. In my colleague's case, her son's counselor assumed that because he is Black, he did not need access to that knowledge. This is systemic racism at its best: it is affecting the lives and futures of Vermont's youth of color.

Access is also harming our business community. Lack of generational wealth and generational knowledge makes it difficult if not impossible for BIPOC businesses to start and to succeed. Communities of color are crowdfunding and passing around the same dollars because of the inequities in the banking system and lack of generational wealth. One member, who had a successful pop-up business, was denied access to capital loans because she was a young, Black woman. Despite the overwhelming evidence that she had a profitable business idea, she lost out on multiple opportunities for a brick and mortar location because she did not have the generational wealth nor the backing of financial institutions. She ended up turning to crowdfunding and she is now successfully running her business.

Recently, I was assisting a BIPOC business owner apply for a state-wide grant opportunity. This member was daunted by the questions being asked and said they didn't know where to start; they didn't have the generational knowledge. To help, I offered to type while they talked about their business. Together, we worked to edit the spoken words into written prose, and worked together to ensure that they had all the documentation they needed to complete the application. This effort took three days to complete. Why? Because this individual was the head of their household, taking care of family and children as well as running a business. We spent a Sunday and two weekday evenings together to ensure the application was completed in time. Yes, the grant offering had support systems in place; but they did not operate at the hours that most accommodated this individual's needs. This is an access issue.

Access is also impacting trust and willingness of the BIPOC community in the resources offered both publicly and privately because there is a lack of representation at the leadership level. There is a great need to provide safe spaces for the BIPOC community, inclusive of individuals with the same lived experiences advocating based on actual needs. This is an issue of accommodation and acceptability for the community.

This is actually represented in the bill itself. I would like to direct attention to page 17, lines 11 through 15, which states that, “The department of economic development, in collaboration with the Vermont Economic Development Authority, the Vermont Center for Emerging Technologies, the Vermont Small Business Development Center, and other relevant stakeholders, shall design and implement the BIPOC Business Development Program.” While the work of these aforementioned organizations are admirable and have benefitted Vermonter communities, these white-led organizations do not have a clear understanding of the realities of what it means to be a BIPOC business and do not have the relationships with or the trust of the community to truly support their needs. We would like to propose that this bill name specific BIPOC stakeholders and organizations such as the VT Professionals of Color and any of the BIPOC-led organizations represented here today, to help in the design and implementation of the BIPOC Business Development program to ensure that the community’s voice is represented and to further support safe spaces for BIPOC voices, for who knows what the community needs better than the community itself?

We support the bill with the proposed amendments, and the creation of the Department of Cultural Empowerment and Economic Advancement and we implore this newly created department to work with organizations on the ground, like the Vermont Professionals of Color Network and other organizations across the state both represented and not represented here in today’s session, to ensure that the efforts of the department are in line with the actual needs of businesses owned by BIPOC and People of the Global Majority in this state.

Thank you for your time and consideration for these thoughts from the Vermont Professionals of Color Network. I am available to answer any questions that you may have.

Sincerely,

Weiwei Wang
Director of Operations and Development
The Vermont Professionals of Color Network