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Vermont Association of Area Agencies on Aging (V4A)
Testimony before the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development
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I am Mary Hayden, Executive Director of the Vermont Association of Area Agencies on Aging. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the important subject of how to bring more retired workers into the workforce.

V4A is an association of five area agencies on aging (AAA's) located throughout Vermont. Our mission is to provide advocacy, leadership, and a voice for Vermont's aging network. The AAA's services include Meals on Wheels and Community Meals, Long-Term Care Coordination, Caregiver Programs, Medicare and Health Insurance Counseling and Education, Wellness Activities and Programs, and Information and Referrals for legal and mental health services and benefits such as housing, fuel, and 3SquaresVT.

As you know, we are one of the oldest states in our region and country. Currently, Vermont faces an acute workforce shortage and needs to fill 23,000 vacant positions. Hiring older workers is an obvious solution, so what may be holding us back?

Vermont already has some things in place to support mature workers as compared to many other states.
- The 2013 Governor's Commission on Successful Aging included the Mature Worker's Initiative;
- One of DAIL's VocRehab programs, Associates for Training and Development serves 55+ workers to re-train for the workforce;
- In 2019 the Department of Labor started the Returnship Program for older workers;
- Vermont's 2020 Economic Development Strategy includes the goal of bringing more older workers back into the workforce.
- One of the core principles of the 2019 Older Vermonters Act includes improving the financial security of older Vermonters through employment.

Like most economic development solutions, it takes a combination of employers and government action to bring more older workers back into the workforce. What can employers do? Employers can:
- Make their Diversity Equity and Inclusion plans inclusive of older workers. When employers report on DEI progress, they could include the number of mature worker hires in their data.
- Encourage employers to accommodate older workers in recruitment practices, and through more flexible terms of employment.
- Encourage creativity, flexibility, and openness to new approaches to recruiting and maintaining older workers - Be welcoming. The recruitment notice of the past may need tweaking. Do employer websites and recruitment notices state that mature workers are welcome to apply?
- Provide a roadmap and toolkit that works for smaller and medium-sized businesses who may not have staff resources and expertise to implement DEI plans.

Many older people are made to feel unwelcome to re-enter the workforce in these ways:

- o Job advertisements for "fresh"; "digital natives"; or "tech savvy" workers, *cues older applicants not to apply*. Ignoring applicants with 20+ years of experience, long resumes, or "old" email accounts (@aol.com) *eliminates older workers*. Some of these cues are now baked into algorithms of tech employers. Older workers are often told to shorten resumes, leave off work history, eliminate graduation dates, etc.

- o Interview questions about ability to work with younger managers, about retirement plans, or where an older candidate wants to be in 10 years *signals that age is a factor*.

- o Older job applicants are counseled to hide their age and look and act younger. Older women in particular feel compelled to dye their hair, "dress young" and even consider Botox, just to look younger for interviews. But are we counseling employers to avoid this kind of ageist signaling in the first instance?

- o In the workplace, an employer can create a *hostile work environment* by allowing ageist humor, constant inquiries about retirement, unchecked name-calling like "dinosaur" or "over the hill".

"Some of us can still work and we have amazing experience/knowledge/abilities. But no one wants to hire us. We need flexible schedules and sometimes the ability to work from home. People are happy to have us volunteer, but we need an income. We need real jobs that respect us and understand our abilities and needs. We don't just want to be school crossing guards…or Walmart greeters. I have a Master's degree and years of amazing work experience. I have so much to offer. So, (we need) some kind of support for people like me." -Older Vermonter Comment on AAA 2020 Needs Assessment.

What can government do? Government can:

- Ensure older Vermonters are afforded the same opportunities for training, retraining, incentives, compensation, and working conditions as younger workers in workplaces free from age discrimination.

- Tie economic programs to DEI to create and value a multigenerational workforce.

- Support initiatives from the business community such as Chamber of Commerce's request to market our state's employers and include marketing to attract older adults to work here.

- Update and refine our data - Who are the older workers who have left? Why did they leave? Do they want to come back? Do they need to come back because they can't afford their expenses? What do they want to come back to? Are they working in the gig economy? Would they want to? In other words, what does our data tell us and how can we fix on a goal?

- Have an older workforce participation goal—who should be around the table to monitor if we are meeting this goal?

- Be accurate about information. For example, we routinely refer to the working population as "18-64". This is not even consistent with Vermont data, where it's estimated that 33% of Vermonters aged 65-74 and 8.5% of Vermonters age 75+ participated in the labor force. (US Census Bureau (2019)). It is based on long-held assumptions about the workforce which assume we all abruptly drop out of employment at age 65. (It's why the federal DOL data does not track weekly earnings data starting at age 65.)

- Older workers also need the social structural back stops to enter and stay in the workforce such as family leave for childcare and eldercare, and kinship care. They also need paid leave time. Older workers are also

faced with caring for relatives, partners and spouses, adult children with disabilities, and grandchildren. They may be at higher risk for adverse health outcomes from COVID while providing care to loved ones. Older workers, not just younger workers, also need leave time and flexible work schedules.

Cultural shifts in our own mindsets are always the hardest to move. 2020, an AARP study found that 78% of older workers reported having seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace—an increase-from 61% in 2018. Many older people do not feel welcome to re-enter the workforce.

Area Agencies on Aging receive feedback from older Vermonters on the difficulties they face re-entering the workforce. Clients of one of our area agencies on aging -a couple in the NEK- lost their jobs due to COVID cutbacks. In spite of their many years of experience, and numerous applications for positions they are highly qualified for, they remain unemployed today. They feel this is due to their age and are now so discouraged they are making plans to sell their home and leave Vermont altogether. This is literally the opposite of the impact we want to have.

Older Vermonters may need to work as their fixed incomes no longer pay the bills:
"Given to the high cost of living for those of us living on extremely modest fixed incomes, (expenses) are simply pricing many older adults out of their homes. And for those of us who still have to work, there is a real lack of programs to help keep people over 60 in the workforce, and there is also a profound lack of awareness among employers of the tremendous value that qualified older adults can bring to a workplace. Older adults who have to work in Vermont because they truly need that income and need jobs that pay a sustainable wage, not minimum wage or near-minimum-wage jobs."-Older Vermonter Comment on AAA 2020 Needs Assessment