



Testimony on H.329

*Amelia Seman, Government Affairs Specialist, Vermont Chamber of Commerce
House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs – January 25, 2022*

Chairman and Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today. My name is Amelia Seman and I am the Government Affairs Specialist for the Vermont Chamber of Commerce. As the largest statewide business organization, the Vermont Chamber represents about 1,500 members, many of them small businesses, and our mission is to help our members grow their businesses and the Vermont economy. Part of that effort has focused on making Vermont an equitable and inclusive state, where all feel welcome. Doing so is necessary for our state and is the best way to attract new residents and workers. At our Economic Conference this morning, we had nearly 200 businesses in attendance for workshops on the importance of diversity and equity in the workplace.

Several bills have been introduced this session aimed at protecting employees in a variety of contexts. The Vermont Chamber is generally supportive of the goals of these bills, though we do have some concerns about unintended consequences, and we are grateful for the opportunity to speak to the Committee about the employer perspective on H.329.

H.329 would allow an employee to file a claim without having previously pursued an internal grievance process. The Vermont Chamber has been working to attract a more diverse workforce and appreciates the Legislature's attention to reviewing harassment and discrimination laws to determine whether updates are needed. However, the Vermont Chamber is concerned that H.329, in bypassing an internal grievance process, leaves employers without the opportunity to take steps to address harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

Vermont employers know that having diverse staffs and fostering an inclusive work environment is critical to attracting high-quality diverse candidates, growing their businesses, and strengthening the Vermont economy. It's also the right thing to do, and many of our members have been working to address workplace harassment and discrimination within their businesses, adopting inclusive company policies, and improving their internal grievance processes. But removing this step also removes employers' ability to find out about issues of discrimination and harassment their employees may be facing, whether it is perpetrated by other members of staff, contractors, business partners, or customers. Employers deserve the opportunity to take steps to address issues in their workplace and improve the health of the work environment for current and future employees. The first chance they have to address workplace culture issues should not be during litigation. Without the internal grievance process

step, workplace problems may fester, and employers risk losing good employees while struggling to attract diverse candidates. We hope the Committee weighs these concerns when considering this legislation.

The Vermont Chamber and our members appreciate the Legislature's attention to improving workplace culture for everyone who lives, works, and does business in Vermont, and we welcome the Committee's questions.