

To: Representative Tom Stevens, Chair, House Committee
on General, Housing and Military Affairs

From: VT Coalition for Disability Rights

Date: March 3, 2022

Thank you for the leadership you and other members of the House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs have provided in your work on H.96. We appreciate the opportunity to be part of the group of stakeholders who will help select members of the selection panel. We appreciate that the proposed structure of the Commission and its subcommittees offers essential opportunities for collaboration and shared learning as well as providing a committee process that supports long overdue attention to the experiences and concerns of affected groups, beginning with Indigenous people, people with disabilities and their families and people of color in Vermont.

Though eugenics is not referred to in the most recent version of the bill, we hope that acknowledgement of Vermont's eugenics history and legacy is reflected in the workplan for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its committees. Racism and ableism did not start during the eugenics period but eugenic beliefs were used to condone cultural biases and justify the discrimination that Native Americans, people of color and people with disabilities experienced. Eugenics codified institutional, structural, and systemic discrimination into laws, policies and program practices implemented here in Vermont. Eugenics justified

the discriminatory actions of other state legislatures and courts and the decisions of the United States Supreme Court. It embedded these same biases into abusive research and treatment methodologies that still affect people today.

The members of VCDR know all too well the dangers of ignoring what systemic bias does to individual and family lives and the rights of groups of people who are not recognized as having lives and identities worthy of respect.

There are some notes in the working draft of this bill relating to what language is best used to describe disability. Disability is now the preferred term rather than phrases like "special needs", for example. The term is embedded in our civil rights laws and is appropriate for use in this bill to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and related committees.

Thank you and we look forward to this moving forward.

Yours truly,

Sarah Launderville
President, VT Coalition for Disability Rights

The mission of VCDR is to advance the human and civil rights of people with disabilities to ensure full and equal participation in all aspects of community life and the political process.