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Introduction the Vermont Renews and Testimony on the Health Care Affordability Commission in the Budget H.439," to the Vermont House Committee on Health Care (5/5/2021)

Thank you Chair Lippert and members of the House Committee on Health Care for welcoming us today.

My name is James Haslam and I'm the Executive Director for Rights and Democracy Vermont. I don't usually provide this role but am today as today is our first Lobby Day and our team is spread out in many different committees talking about current legislation and a new coalition called Vermont Renews (and our team knows I am passionate about the movement for universal health care). Joining me today to testify are Rights & Democracy members and partners Angela Lawrence, Alex Lehning and Peter Sterling.

But before I begin, we wanted to share a land acknowledgement with the committee: "Rights and Democracy acknowledges the Mahican (in southern Vermont) and Abenaki peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Ndinna (En-DAH-kee-nah), which includes parts of Vermont, New Hampshire, New England, and Quebec. As guests on the unceded territory of the Mahican and Abenaki peoples, we honor their ancestors, elders, and relations past, present and emerging. We also acknowledge that our nation has benefited from the uncompensated and exploited labor represented in the legacy of slavery and the present-day reality of migrant farmworkers." Thank you.

Introduction to Rights & Democracy and Vermont Renews

Rights & Democracy--which we call RAD for short-- and our sibling organization the Rights & Democracy Institute, were founded in 2015 on the theory of change that it takes sustained collective action--year after year--to make the kind of big, bold, long-term changes in this country to advance human rights and build to build a real democracy.

Part of the theory of change is that durable political infrastructure--in this case, a membership organization--to sustain the momentum necessary to do that work throughout and in between elections. RAD members and staff work on issues that matter to our communities, organize for policy change at the state and national level, and recruit and train people to run for office.

Our members are from all walks of life, intergenerational, multicultural, activists, artists, organizers – but most importantly passionate fighters for true social justice and

meaningful change in our communities and across the state. We have chapters across Vermont and New Hampshire – look for us wherever you are.

This is what we know, our current systems are deeply dysfunctional, rooted in historical oppressions and fragile. When those fragile systems break, it is Vermonters who have been systemically kept out of places of power that are the most impacted.

Abenaki/Indigenous Persons, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA individuals, individuals with disabilities, senior citizens, New Americans/Migrant Community, youth/young Adults, poor/working poor are the ones who carry the weight of policies and systems gone wrong. These individuals are nearly 80% of the Vermont voting population, the least represented in our state government and are in some cases, wholly invisible to those who enact the policies that can prove deadly to their communities.

We recognize that there are powerful forces that strategically use racism and hate to divide our communities, but we know that when we all come together we can build a strong multiracial democracy in which everyone can thrive. It is our pleasure to testify to you today and share our visions of collective liberation and a more just and vibrant Vermont.

On the federal level, we are working hard to promote the Thrive Agenda, the next generation of comprehensive reform birthed from the transformative work of the Green New Deal. Regionally, the Rights & Democracy Institute has joined hundreds of organizations across New England who are joining forces to bring a shared agenda that amplifies the power and will of the people and have formed the Renew New England Alliance to push forward bold structural change across all six states. And today, we are thrilled to roll out Vermont's call to action, Vermont Renews! Vermont Renews is a new and growing coalition of leading grassroots organizations, labor unions, racial justice groups, frontline communities, and environmental advocates. Including Justice For All, 350 VT, Vermont AFLCIO, Sunrise, NOFA, Community Action Works, Champlain Valley DSA, Migrant Justice and more. We've come together to address our state's overlapping crises: mass unemployment, racial injustice, the coronavirus pandemic, and climate change.

Globally, a haunting truth must be reckoned with and addressed: people of the global majority/BIPOC and our poor bear the largest negative impacts of the environmental crisis yet are the least contributors to the crisis itself. We believe strongly that any solutions proposed should be designed to help heal and restore our communities as an intentional priority rather than a hopeful aspiration of a trickle-down approach.

Rights and Democracy Institute is addressing this head on through the formation of a BIPOC centered advisory group of experts to guide this process and the policy proposals that will help us reach our climate goals. This council recently submitted a

letter to the state of Vermont to raise the hopes, dreams and demands of those most impacted as guidance for the work ahead. That letter has been shared with this committee, I encourage you to review and hold the words in that letter to heart as you make your policy recommendations and decisions.

Currently, our coalition is working diligently on innovative policy proposals in the areas of Housing Justice, Food Justice and Green Justice Zones, an emerging initiative that uses data mapping, community design and a participatory budgeting process to support community revitalization. And of course, we are ever present for the conversations relating to social justice issues.

Today, over two dozen individuals are speaking their truths in committees throughout the legislature. I ask that you hear their stories, honor their courage in testifying and support their time shared with today. Before turning it over to Alex, Angela and Peter we were also asked to also speak specifically to a piece of current health care legislation.

The Joint Legislative Health Care Affordability Commission in the Budget H.439.

First off, Rights & Democracy is an organization that strongly believes in the right to health care to all people and believe fundamentally we must shift from treating health care as a commodity and instead approach it as a public good. Given that, we support any and all efforts to expand public health care programs as the current private health insurance marketplace is a major problem for far too many families.

The problem: A 2015 Harvard University study found that 62% of personal bankruptcy filings are due to medical bills. Other research has produced similar findings. Most Vermonters and their employers would agree that the cost of health care is too high and causes great financial hardship. In a September 2020 poll commissioned by the Alliance for a Better Vermont, voters said they are most concerned about the cost and availability of healthcare (69% very concerned), and this was over issues such as the economic impacts of COVID-19, support for small businesses and the local economy, and jobs and unemployment. We still have too many people uninsured, and have a growing crisis of people underinsured who simply can't afford the out of pocket costs they are expected to pay when they need care and medication.

Why We Need to Act Now: We have a small window of opportunity where we have health care reform-friendly leadership in the U.S. Congress and public opinion remains strongly behind the Biden Administration pursuing big reforms funded by the federal government. Vermont needs to start preparing now to take advantage of this window of opportunity because Vermont needs federal financial support to enact any meaningful health care reforms. We believe it is also time for the states to signal that they're prepared to work with our federal government. Work must begin immediately to build

legislative support for any sweeping changes to our health care system, including any significant expansion of our public health care programs.

Why this Commission is a good idea: Contained in the budget is both language and an appropriation for a six member joint house/senate commission to hold public hearings in the fall of 2021 and study various options to expand public health care programs to, among other things, move Vermonters out of high cost private insurance plans into more affordable public option type coverage. The Commission would directly engage with Vermonters who are most adversely impacted by lack of equitable access to health care through a series of community meetings -- this is the kind of participatory and democratic community-based research that we believe is essential to the development of public policy that meets our diverse communities' needs. If we were to offer any recommendations to this committee, it would be to ensure that every adversely impacted constituency is represented, which may sometimes require removal of any and all barriers to community participation, such as interpretation, transportation, and child care.

The commission has in its mission to explore ways to work with the Biden Administration on these reforms. Given that the Biden Administration as well as Senator Bernie Sanders have both publicly supported an "age-banded" approach to expanding access to public health care programs (as opposed to solely relying on a "single payer" approach), the Senate has charged the Commission to specifically explore options around expanding access to Medicaid to allow enrollment for the 50-64 year old age band potentially helping about 110,000 people get more affordable coverage.

The commission would hire experts, do its research and hold eight public hearings and come back to the Legislature in January, 2022 with recommendations.

This health care affordability commission included is the appropriate vehicle to jump start a very necessary public conversation on what Vermonters and their employers are paying for health care. We support their goal to consider practical and shorter-term pathways to expand access to public health care programs -- for example, bringing more youth and those over 50, for example, into public programs -- while also more broadly reviewing Vermont's current approach to managing health care affordability. Our communities need both immediate options for reform and the opportunity to participate in community-led reflection on our need for more systematic reforms.

Who else is supporting this? Other organizations also supporting this effort are the Vermont NEA, AARP-Vermont, VPIRG, United Professions of Vermont/American Federation of Teachers, Planned Parenthood of Northern New England and Vermont Interfaith Action who collectively represent tens of thousands of Vermonters.

Thank you for your time today and for your service to the people of Vermont.