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Vermont Senate Committee on Government Operations - April 19, 2022

H. 96 An Act Relating to Creating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Development Task Force

My name is Max Barrows. I live in Worcester, Vermont. I'm a Black man with a disability. I am on the autism spectrum. I work for Green Mountain Self-Advocates.

Green Mountain Self-Advocates includes more than 600 members who are people with intellectual and developmental disabilities of all religions, races, genders, sexualities, immigration and socio-economic statuses, and more. When we advocate for equal access, rights, and opportunities, we are speaking up on behalf of our *whole* community.

We want to thank the members of this committee for your hard work to pass J.R.H.2, the joint resolution apologizing for state-sanctioned eugenics policies and practices. **And, thank you for working in 2022 on the next steps, beyond apologizing, to pass H. 96 to create a Truth and Reconciliation Task Force. We ask that this initiative include disability when looking at ways to address institutional, structural, and systemic discrimination in Vermont.**

Ableism is alive and well in 2022. People with disabilities are looked down on more than looked up to. Society continues to send a strong message that we are not capable, we are too slow. It ties into the false idea that people with intellectual disabilities are not able to do a lot of things for ourselves, like adults.

Unfortunately, it is a pretty broadly accepted mindset. It is huge. It casts a shadow

over our desires to work, go to college, get married, have kids, the list goes on and on.

A friend from Brattleboro told me, *“At work when there is a big load of groceries, I try to keep up. It is hard to keep up. It’s fast-paced, and I cannot do a fast pace. At night, I write in my journal about work. I tell myself that, ‘It is okay to be slow.’ ”*

People think we do not understand what is going on. People often assume that we need help when we do not. They jump to give directions without giving us a chance to figure something out on our own. People set limits on what we can do without asking us. They set low expectations.

People with disabilities face discrimination when trying to get and keep a job. In 2020, for people ages 16 to 64, the employment rates were around 29% for people with a disability compared to 70% for people without a disability. Now, these are national numbers. I can add that I know many people with intellectual disabilities who do not have a job and who want to work. Yet, we live in a state in need of workers. We can do better at providing the support that people with disabilities need to get and keep jobs. People with disabilities are not getting equal access to education, health care, and lived experiences relating to sexuality, sexual health, and relationships. Ableism has allowed service providers, educators, parents, and others to de-sexualize people with disabilities, especially young people with disabilities, people with disabilities who are also LGBTQ+ or of color. Green Mountain Self-Advocates has nationally recognized sexuality training materials that are in plain language, we need resources to hire peer mentors and trainers. We are also skilled at providing disability awareness training to medical staff. Again, we are

looking for resources to work with other disability groups to train health care providers to improve access to healthcare for people with disabilities.

People with disabilities experience violence at much higher rates than people without disabilities. The 2010 to 2014 National Crime Victimization Survey found that people with disabilities were more than three times as likely to experience serious violent crime, which includes rape, sexual assault, aggravated assault, and robbery, than are people without disabilities. Yet, people with disabilities face significant barriers to reporting their victimization. Their accounts are often dismissed or not taken seriously, as well as experiencing unequal access to social and medical services.

It is troubling that Vermont students with disabilities are nearly 3 times more likely than students without disabilities to be suspended. And, the use of exclusionary discipline, restraint, seclusion, referral to law enforcement, and school-related arrest varies widely.

Again, we feel Vermont could do better at educating people with disabilities and their families, allies, and service providers about how ableism plays a role in violence against people with disabilities. We must understand the connection between ableism and violence. This opens the door towards achieving disability justice.

Finally, I want to mention that approximately 50% of the roughly 3,500 people who receive developmental services live with their families. I, for example, live with my family. When I left high school I was eligible for, and got, employment support and service coordination. It is a lot more difficult to get housing and residential support. Typically, someone does not meet a funding priority for residential support until their parents are no longer able to support

them. We have many people with developmental disabilities who are in their 50's and 60's living with their elderly parents. This is a housing issue that needs to be addressed.

Vermont was the second state in the country to close its institution, Brandon Training School. We are seen as a leader in providing individualized community-based services for people with developmental disabilities. We all would like this to continue. But, in order for that to happen, Vermont needs to do better with providing housing and residential support. As I said, the majority of people with developmental disabilities do not have options for living a typical life in the community like every other Vermont citizen. We need to move away from relying on aging parents to provide the bulk of services.

We want our state to continue to be viewed as a leader going forward. So, ALL Vermont residents should have the housing and residential supports in place so we can live fully in the community. Basically, our message as people with disabilities, of course including people from diverse cultural backgrounds, is “we want what you got”. This means marriage, raising a family, jobs, education, friends, respect, being loved.

My final comments are to remind us of the promise made by Governor Howard Dean when Brandon Training School closed in 1993. Governor Dean said, *“I’m proud to maintain the commitment of the state to the very kind of services that we still owe to the population that was once at Brandon and is now in the community. We will continue to assure that individuals receive support and services; We will continue to assure that those services meet acceptable levels of*

quality; We will continue to assure that persons receiving the services are free from abuse and neglect or mistreatment; To assure that the folks taking care of the people needing these services have adequate training and support. So, our commitment does not end with the closing of this institution. Our commitment continues.”

Thank you for reading our testimony.

For Green Mountain Self-Advocates, our policy focus on self-determination is shared with many other communities who are left out and have experienced a long history of discrimination. I will let our members know about this committee's ongoing commitment to inclusion as well as serving and supporting people with developmental disabilities. We appreciate all that you have done and all that you will continue to do to improve the lives of Vermonters with disabilities. **And again, one way to do so is to include people with disabilities in H. 96 when looking at ways to address institutional, structural, and systemic discrimination in Vermont.**