

RAD 2023 Lobby Day Introduction Testimony

Thank you Chair Durfee and members of the Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry committee for welcoming us today. My name is Michael Weiss and I am the Environmental Justice Organizer for Rights & Democracy in Vermont.

Before I begin, I wish to share a land acknowledgement with the committee:

"Rights & Democracy acknowledges the Mahican (in southern Vermont) and Abenaki peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Ndaakinnah (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.

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 people power, year after year, to make the kind of big, bold, long-term changes we want to see in this country.

Our members are from all walks of life: intergenerational, multicultural, activists, organizers – but most importantly, passionate fighters for true social justice and meaningful change in our communities and across the state.

Our current systems are rooted in historic oppressions, deeply dysfunctional, and fragile. Vermonters who have been systemically kept out of places of power are those most impacted.

Abenaki/Indigenous Persons, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA individuals, individuals with disabilities, older adults, New Americans, youth, and poor are the people who carry the weight of policies and systems gone wrong. These individuals are nearly 80% of the Vermont voting population, are the least represented in our state government, and are in some cases wholly invisible to those who enact the policies.

Our mission is to bring people together to take action to build healthy communities and make the values of our communities guide the policies of our government. We believe we can achieve a society where people earn a livable wage and have access to affordable health care, and where a progressive and equitable tax system supports an economy that protects the environment and human rights.

It is our pleasure to testify to you today and share our visions of a more just and vibrant Vermont. I'll start us off by sharing with you our 2023 policy platform.

Vermont must do its part to ensure a just transition to a clean energy future that mandates renewable energy and ends our reliance on dirty, polluting fossil fuels. And we must guarantee that everyone benefits - especially Vermonters who have been most impacted by past and current harms.

That's why this year we are supporting the passage of S5 the Affordable Heat Act while still calling for greater equity provisions within the bill.

We are also supporting efforts to reform the Renewable Energy Standard and ensure that Vermont can get to 30% in state renewable energy and 30% regional renewable energy in the next decade. In-state renewable energy is the key to our state resiliency, helps build the green economy that Vermont communities need, and doesn't shift the climate burden of our energy use to other states.

We are also supporting H56 the Ratepayer Protection and Thermal Energy Network Act. This bill in House Environment and Energy would extend electric ratepayer protections to more Vermonters, adds a proven solution to Vermont's energy choices by creating a pathway for geothermal, and moves Vermont away from combusting fuels by prohibiting gas expansion into new service territories.

On top of the Climate Crisis, we know Vermont is also in a Housing crisis. We all know this. There isn't enough affordable housing for Vermonters and many of us are forced to live in unsafe places that are too expensive. And tenants who bring concerns about their living conditions to landlords also have to worry about eviction and homelessness.

We need Housing For All. That is why we need to work both on creating new affordable housing like provisions in the Senate Housing Omnibus bill and also we need to protect tenants' rights. The Housing Omnibus bill includes many needed zoning, Act 250, and housing discrimination changes that we support and hope that the bill will pass the House and Senate.

To meet the needs of tenants in Vermont we must also pass statewide Just Cause Eviction protection, Eviction Diversion programs, and cap the amounts of rent increases that tenants will have to bear. Last year, the Legislature passed Burlington's City Charter Change for Just Cause Eviction, but the Governor vetoed that bill. We need to build off the 99 votes the House got in the Veto Override and pass that bill this year.

We also need to ensure that Vermont has all the data it needs to accurately track our rental market including where the units are, who owns them, the accessibility of the unit, and other pertinent information. Without this basic information we will always be behind on understanding the true rental crisis and it limits our ability to take action for Vermont renters.

When it comes to public education, we have a long way to go to make all Vermont schools equitable and welcoming for all students. We need to remove police from schools, make anti-discrimination policies more accessible, and develop an education funding system that is as equitable as possible by implementing the recommendations of the Income-Based Education Tax Study Committee.

Vermont is known as a leader for voting rights and democracy and we need to continue that leadership by implementing a system of Ranked Choice Voting for the Presidential Primaries and then for all elections. Ranked Choice Voting gives more access to more candidates and gives voters real choice at the ballot box.

We must also create a state legislature that everyone can take part in. This means greatly increasing the salary and benefits for our state legislators and also the per diems for those appointed to state boards and committees.

Furthermore, we must address Vermont's overdose crisis. Vermont has become a leader in the deadliness of the Overdose Crisis. The legislature last year passed many important provisions that were undone with a Governor's veto. This year we must pass permanent buprenorphine ["byoo-pruh-NOR-feen"] decriminalization for personal use, create Overdose Prevention Sites, make accessible community based syringe services for all Vermonters, create a Mobile Methadone Clinic Pilot Program, and expand treatment education for first responders. This means supporting H72 and H222.

And of course, to both mitigate and prepare for the climate crisis, nurture community and local economies, and support the health of Vermonters, we must create a food system rooted in justice. We must create equitable access to land, farming, and food. We were glad to see the passage of Universal School Meals in 2022, but it's time to find a permanent funding solution to ensure that all Vermont's children get the healthy meals they need without stigma.

Additionally, The Land Access Opportunity Board is an equity board created by the legislature in the last biennium and is housed at the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. In the coming weeks, this Board will release a report of recommendations that the legislature should consider and take action on. But what we do know NOW is that the Board will need continued funding to do its work. This means a Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Adjustment of \$1 million. This will allow the Board to formalize its procedures and set itself up for the long term work that is needed in creating greater access and opportunity for those Vermonters who have been historically left out.

Additionally, Workers in Vermont's retail, restaurant, agricultural, and other service industries play deeply vital roles in our communities. Yet these workers are often underpaid and underprotected in their workplaces. To thrive, all workers need fair and dignified wages, full benefits, and strong legal protections.

The subminimum wage, a direct legacy of slavery, particularly impacts women, and disproportionately women of color. It is time to end the subminimum wage and pass One Fair Wage for all Vermonters. We also need to pass the VT PRO Act that strengthens worker's rights.

It is important that we lift the voices of the people, and today I am joined by some of our amazing leaders. Today, two dozen individuals are speaking their truths in committees throughout the Legislature.

Joining me are Rights and Democracy supporters and allies:

Ana Mejia, Rights & Democracy's Vermont Organizing Director and former organizer with the Vermont Releaf Collective.

Jess Laporte, Researcher for Sustainable Organic Integrated Livelihoods, based in Haiti an organizer at Community Resilience Organizations, and a member of the Land Access and Opportunity Board

Introduce first speaker