

Written Testimony on S.39 – Felisha Leffler, Former Vermont State Representative

Thank you for inviting me to testify on this bill and share my experiences and thoughts. I am excited to see a bill addressing compensation being brought up and heard as it is a glaring problem. Right now, only those that can afford to serve or afford to sacrifice can be part of our legislative body. The demands of the position as an elected official that are year-round are only compensated during the five month session. During which, it is extremely difficult to maintain full time employment in any other occupation. Without full time employment, many – including myself – do not have access to benefits such as healthcare, FSA's, or HSA's as it is not something provided in the legislative compensation package.

To only have those that can afford to serve or afford to sacrifice take part in the Vermont General Assembly, it's an exclusion of many that want to serve and could contribute brilliantly to policy to help shape a better Vermont. This also particularly excludes younger Vermonters, Vermonters with families that rely on them, and more. To put simply, the current process of legislative compensation is exclusionary and limits the inclusive representation of Vermonters under the golden dome.

As a former representative, I can say simply that no one is getting rich by serving in the Vermont General Assembly. It is my recollection in fact that without working multiple full time jobs both during session and when we gaveled out, there was no way for me to make ends meet on my legislative income. I worked as an EMT full time every weekend – often leaving Montpelier on Friday's and going directly to the station to clock in. I would work 48-60 hours between Friday evening and Monday morning. That was my primary income. Due to working nearly 100-120 hours weekly between session and this work to make ends meet, I realized the toll that serving was taking on my health, my relationships, and so much more and it was a primary factor when deciding not to run for re-election. I simply could not afford to serve my community and my state anymore.

Tragic as this is, I am not the only Vermonter to have to step back from serving due to these circumstances. Former Rep. Paul Martin resigned his position due to the expense and sacrifices that he was having to make. I recall when now Senator Hashim – formerly Rep. Hashim did not run for reelection after his first term due to similar conflicts. Former Rep. Patrick Seymore resigned his position due to needing to “get a real job” to support his family. The list of voices lost from the legislative process due to inadequate compensation is expansive and frankly upsetting. I'll note that most of those that resign, do not run for re-election, or do not run in the first place are younger Vermonters. The issue of legislative compensation hits particularly hard on those that are working to establish themselves or have families to support and the opportunity cost and lost earnings from serving is a heavy yoke. In a state with a real issue of losing its younger age cohorts, it's a worthwhile reflection to note that they're also missing from the General Assembly and that's part of the problem.

Representing Vermonters is a year-round job and should have the basic compensation structure to reflect the nature of that work as well as provide basic benefits that we require all other employers to offer to their full time employees. It's not on partisan lines or a partisan issue to say that legislative compensation needs to change to have a truly representative legislative body.

I am grateful again for the committee's time and the opportunity to provide testimony in support of S.39 and support improving the compensation for those that serve Vermont.

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