

Good morning. My name is Sarah Launderville, and I'm the Executive Director of the Vermont Center for Independent Living. VCIL is a statewide disability justice organization focused on supporting Vermonters with disabilities. We are people with disabilities working together for dignity and independence.

I also serve as the President of the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights (VCDR) which is a coalition of organizations across Vermont advancing the civil and human rights of people with disabilities.

I am here today in these roles, and also as a person living with disabilities.

Today, many Vermonters with disabilities are here at the statehouse for our annual Disability Advocacy Day. The theme of this year's day, is "Write Disability Rights Into every bill."

Thank you for your willingness to explore what that looks like within the work of this committee.

VCDR is grounded in five core principles:

- Disability is a natural part of the human experience.
- Community supports should come before institutions.
- Self-determination and independent living must be centered.
- Peer support is essential.
- Every person with a disability deserves dignity and respect.

These principles remind us that disability cannot be an afterthought but must be intentionally woven into all policymaking, including agriculture, food systems, land use, and natural resource management.

Your committee plays a vital role in shaping conditions that directly affect the health, safety, and well-being of disabled Vermonters. Food access, nutrition standards, climate resilience, and environmental protections are not only agricultural issues, they are disability justice issues. Disabled Vermonters experience high rates of food insecurity, chronic illness, and income inequality. Decisions about how food is sourced for schools and institutions, and how resilient our food system is during climate disruptions, have disproportionate impacts on people with disabilities, who may have specific dietary needs, limited transportation, or fixed incomes. Strengthening local food systems and creating resilient supply chains directly supports independent living.

Since this committee also influences land use, housing access, and public land policy, it has a hand in parts of our system that shapes disability equity. Land-use rules, agricultural housing standards, and programs that support beginning or transitioning farmers affect who can afford to live and work in Vermont.

Disabled Vermonters face long-standing barriers to affordable, accessible, integrated housing. And many farmers acquire disabilities over the course of their careers due to injury, aging, or chronic health conditions. Climate adaptation, forest management, and environmental regulation further impact disabled Vermonters, particularly those with respiratory disabilities, mobility disabilities, or environmental sensitivities. When this committee centers disability justice, you help build a food system, environment, and rural economy that includes everyone.

I want to begin by recognizing the intersection of farming and disability. Farming is one of Vermont's most dangerous and physically demanding occupations, with high rates of back injuries, joint deterioration, amputations, chronic pain, mobility disabilities, and depression. Vermont farmers face additional pressures including aging bodies, long hours, financial strain, and geographic isolation that compound physical and mental-health issues. Many continue working despite significant disabilities, often without accommodations or support.

For years, the Vermont AgrAbility Project, jointly operated by UVM Extension and VCIL, played a key role in meeting these needs. AgrAbility helped farmers evaluate their worksites, identify assistive tools and modifications, and connect with peers who had successfully adapted to disability. Unfortunately, with the end of funding, the program is no longer active in Vermont, leaving a gap.

We are fortunate to still have Farm First, a partnership between HireAbility Vermont, Invest EAP, and the Vermont Association of Business, Industry, and Rehabilitation. Farm First offers mental-health support, a 24/7 hotline, resource coordination, counseling, and a trained peer network of farmers who provide confidential, non-judgmental support. This program is a lifeline, and we encourage continued investment in its capacity. VCIL runs an assistive technology program where people can access up to \$1,500 in support including for farming adaptive equipment but the funding is low and there is always a waiting list.

I want to connect our theme to several bills currently before this committee. These are only examples. We welcome ongoing conversations and hope you will continue reaching out to VCDR members for disability perspectives on bills moving forward.

H.537, the bill to protect the right to grow vegetable gardens, promotes food access, health, and autonomy for disabled Vermonters especially renters and residents of common-interest communities who often face restrictions on gardening. For disabled Vermonters who rely on home-grown produce to manage chronic conditions, reduce grocery costs, or adapt gardening to mobility or sensory needs, this bill turns gardening from a discretionary privilege into a practical tool for self-sufficiency.

VCIL has a peer-led Garden Club, which includes many members who cannot easily leave their homes. For them, container and raised-bed gardening is a source of fresh food, social connection, and emotional well-being. H.537 aligns with the independent-living philosophy by protecting the right to grow food at home and eliminating structural barriers that disproportionately affect disabled renters and condo owners.

Turning to H.423, which implements the *Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan 2021–2030*: this plan and its funding are essential to food access, community health, and economic equity for disabled Vermonters. Disabled people are among those most affected by food insecurity and supply-chain disruptions. Investments in local food infrastructure, shorter supply chains, and stronger producer-processor-market connections are investments in disability equity.

The plan also aims to stabilize the broader food and farm economy. As mentioned earlier, many farmers and food-system workers acquire disabilities during their careers. Investing in business stability, workforce supports, and technical assistance uplifts a population often invisible in disability policy.

Strengthening food resilience and local production is especially important for disabled Vermonters who are disproportionately impacted by climate emergencies and public-health disruptions. H.423 helps ensure that Vermont's food system grows in ways that are inclusive, equitable, and accessible.

Food access overall, including bills like H.408, which strengthens the state's ability to purchase local foods, and H.868, which limits ultra-processed foods in school programs could also be helpful to disabled Vermonters. Food access is a disability-rights issue.

Disabled Vermonters experience the high rates of food insecurity in the state. VCIL administers a Meals on Wheels program for people with disabilities under age 60, and for many, this is their only nutritionally balanced meal each day. When Vermont invests in local food procurement, it shortens supply chains and increases resilience, ensuring that people who already face transportation barriers or fixed incomes can access healthy food consistently. For disabled Vermonters who require specialized diets or are more vulnerable to nutritional gaps, greater access to Vermont-grown food supports health, dignity, and independence.

Similarly, H.868 is important for disabled children and families. Many disabled students rely on school meals as a primary source of daily nutrition. The quality of those meals affects development, energy, and long-term health outcomes. Reducing reliance on highly processed foods ensures that children especially those with disabilities or chronic conditions needing steady, balanced nutrition receive meals that support their ability to learn, participate, and thrive.

Together, H.408 and H.868 could advance disability equity by strengthening Vermont's food system in ways that support the health and economic security of disabled Vermonters.

I also want to speak briefly about Vermont's state parks, which are vital parts of community life for people with disabilities.

Over the years, Vermont has made meaningful strides toward making state parks more accessible and inclusive. The Agency of Natural Resources affirms that individuals with mobility disabilities are entitled to full use of state lands and has adopted accommodations allowing wheelchairs and other power-driven mobility devices on appropriate routes. Some parks now include adaptive beach-access wheelchairs and accessible walkways, and the Park Access Fund provides free park passes for Vermonters who face barriers including those with disabilities through partnerships with more than 60 organizations statewide. These efforts reflect Vermont's longstanding commitment to ensuring the outdoors is open to all.

However, significant barriers remain. Only about 1% of Vermont's trails are considered accessible, leaving most too steep, uneven, or narrow for many people with mobility disabilities. Many state-land routes are gated or closed sometimes due to storm damage, which restricts access for those who rely on mobility devices and need predictable, open routes. Accessible information is inconsistent, making it difficult for visitors with disabilities to plan trips or confirm whether facilities, restrooms, or beaches meet their needs. Adaptive recreation opportunities, while excellent, are not available statewide, and economic and transportation barriers persist. Much progress has been made but more work is needed to ensure equitable, meaningful access for all Vermonters.

Thank you again for your time today and for your leadership and for your willingness to center disability justice in the work of this committee. By writing disability rights into legislation, whether through food systems, land use, public health, or agricultural support you help create a Vermont where all of us can thrive.

Respectfully Submitted:  
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*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.*