



Holding the Line After 2025

Policy Recommendations
from the HRC 2025 Civil
Rights Summit

January 2026





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The Vermont Human Rights Commission is an independent State agency. Our mission is to advance full civil and human rights in Vermont. We address complaints of discrimination in housing, places of public accommodation, and State government employment. Our small team conducts investigations, advises on policy, educates the public, litigates cases, and engages the community.

Photo: Commissioner Bruce Wilson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Vermont Human Rights Commission invited community advocates and concerned citizens to attend the 2025 Civil Rights Summit on November 14-16, 2025. This hybrid event drew in over 300 participants and speakers. We came together with one goal in mind: **to discuss strategies for strengthening civil rights in Vermont.** In light of current actions by the federal administration, there is no time to waste. **Vermont lawmakers must act now in several key areas:** housing, immigrant justice, trans rights, disability access, equal protection, racial justice and educational equity. **Civil rights and existing anti-discrimination protections need renewed focus, increased resources, and robust enforcement.** Our specific recommendations in each area are summarized in the pages that follow. We affirm that community members and their advocates are the subject matter experts who know best what is needed in these times. We strongly encourage policymakers to keep the concerns of our most threatened and marginalized communities at the center of any civil rights discussion.

With Appreciation,
Big Hartman, Esq.
HRC Executive Director



HOUSING ACCESS

It's no surprise to anyone living in Vermont that we are in a housing crisis, with a shortage of available housing units, a lack of affordable housing, and an unacceptable rate of homelessness. Housing advocates recommend the following immediate actions:

1. CREATE A STATE-FUNDED RENTAL SUBSIDY

As federal HUD programs including Section 8 are experiencing massive cuts, and local waitlists for Section 8 housing are untenably long, we call for a state-funded system for subsidizing housing for low income Vermonters. Consistent with state law, this program would need to be available to all people regardless of citizenship, immigration status, or other legally protected characteristic.

2. JUST CAUSE EVICTION LAW

The majority of evictions in Vermont are for no cause. By implementing a statewide just cause eviction law, landlords would be required to have a specific, legally valid reason to end a tenancy. We urge adoption of such a law in Vermont in order to promote housing stability and prevent arbitrary and retaliatory removals.

3. HOUSING STATUS AS A LEGALLY PROTECTED CATEGORY

People who are unhoused endure increasing stigma, mistreatment, and discrimination. We urge lawmakers to add "housing status" as a legally protected category in employment, places of public accommodations, and housing.

Scan this code to watch the panel on inclusionary zoning from the HRC's 2025 Civil Rights Summit.



4. ADVANCE INCLUSIONARY ZONING

Inclusionary zoning incentivizes affordable housing development in order to combat the effects of segregation and create more diverse communities. Low wage earners, older people, families with children, and people with disabilities are too often excluded from the housing market without mandated inclusionary zoning provisions to ensure housing is built that they can actually afford. We can do better.

5. UPDATE THE ROADMAP TO END HOMELESSNESS

The Agency of Human Services commissioned an extensive review of solutions to end homelessness in Vermont in 2017. While some recommendations gained traction, many were ignored or abandoned. The current state of homelessness in Vermont begs that the report be revisited and an updated map to end homeless be drawn.

Photo:
Venessa Tufts and Jessica Radboard



Scan this code to watch the panel on homelessness from the HRC's 2025 Civil Rights Summit.



IMMIGRANT JUSTICE

The U.S. government has a long history of discrimination and punitive treatment of immigrants. Recent tactics by the Trump administration both continue and escalate that history. Community service providers and immigrants' rights advocates recommend the following:

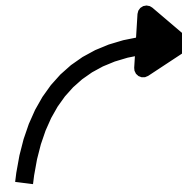
6. STATE-FUNDED ACCESS TO LEGAL COUNSEL FOR IMMIGRANTS IN VERMONT DETENTION CENTERS

Immigrants detained in Vermont should have the same access to attorneys as criminal defendants to ensure their fair day in court. We recommend expanding the public defender framework to fund immigration attorneys for people civilly detained in Vermont.



7. REMOVAL OF BARRIERS TO MEDICAL AND LEGAL SERVICES IN DETENTION

Advocates have observed that prison conditions for civil detainees held under the Vermont DOC-ICE contract are not adequate. People incarcerated in Vermont need language access to contact their families, seek legal advice, and obtain effective medical treatment. DOC must be required to do better in 2026.



Scan this code to watch the 80-minute panel on immigration justice from the HRC's 2025 Civil Rights Summit.

8. SAFEGUARD COMMUNITY SPACES

Under Trump's policies, many immigrants are now fearful to participate in daily community life. State legislation can help change this, and ensure that businesses, schools, hospitals, and other public spaces are empowered to lawfully refuse ICE access without a valid judicial warrant. We urge immediate passage of these bills.

9. FUND A STATE OFFICE FOR NEW AMERICANS

In 2025, the legislature created an Office of New Americans Study Committee to collect data and make recommendations on how to best serve the recent immigrant community. We urge legislators to create that office with all urgency and allocate funds for staffing in FY27. These measures will avoid unnecessary delays in coordinating services and developing policy for all immigrants living in Vermont.

Photo: Jill Martin Diaz, Mike Pieciak, and Tracy Dolan



QUEER JUSTICE

The Trump administration is actively seeking to restrict the rights of queer and trans people. Vermont has a long and proud history of protecting the right to marry and the right to be free of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Queer rights advocates recommend:



10. ESTABLISH THE GENDER AFFIRMING CARE FUND

Access to essential healthcare for trans people is under attack by the federal government. The Trump administration is attempting to weaponize federal funding to deprive trans people from receiving gender affirming care. These attempts present a direct threat to the identity and safety of trans people. Thankfully the community has found an alternative.

We support the establishment of a Vermont Affirming Health Care Trust Fund. This would create a system of monetary awards to cover costs associated with receiving and providing gender-affirming health care services in Vermont.

Scan this code to watch the panel on affirming LGBTQ+ Vermonters from the HRC's 2025 Civil Rights Summit.



Photos: Meg York [left] and Monica Allard [above]

CIVIL RIGHTS ENFORCEMENT

As the Trump administration continues actively to dismantle civil rights enforcement at the federal level, it is more important than ever that Vermont state agencies shore up the tools we have to safeguard and advance our civil rights. If state enforcement is our primary form of protection, it must be robust.

11. INCREASE RESOURCES FOR HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION AND ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE CIVIL RIGHTS UNIT

All civil rights complaint investigations and litigation by the HRC and AGO CRU are carried out by only a handful of individuals. This leads to protracted investigations, with many complaints not being investigated at all. Vermonters need us to do better, and increased funding is required in these times. State and local leaders rely on the HRC for substantive policy advice and for discrimination prevention training, yet there is no funding allocated for these specific purposes. If we increase public awareness, testing, outreach and training, we can reduce complaints and instances of discrimination statewide. Funding community education will increase the effectiveness of the HRC's work.

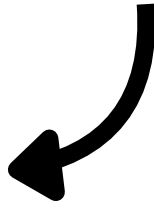


Photo: Julio Thompson, Big Hartman & Xusana Davis



Scan this code to watch the panel called "What Your State Can Do For You" from the HRC's 2025 Civil Rights Summit.

Scan this code to watch the panel on
voting access from the HRC's 2025
Civil Rights Summit



DISABILITY RIGHTS

About a quarter of all people living in Vermont have one or more disabilities. Overwhelmingly, the disability community has advocated for increased access to civil life, better statewide compliance with the ADA, and a reckoning with the persistent reality of ableism. Disability advocates at the Summit recommend the following:

12. EXPAND ACCESS TO LOCAL ELECTIONS

Nationally, Vermont ranks as one of the worst states for accessible voting. Individuals with disabilities are routinely and systematically denied access to their local elections and town meetings when only in-person participation is permitted. We urge consideration of legislation to ensure that Australian ballot will be used in all local elections to address this inequity.



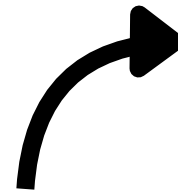
Photo: Maria Rinaldi

13. EXPAND PUBLIC ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC MEETINGS

In addition to being excluded from many local elections, people with disabilities also report being denied access to and participation in other public meetings, including Town Meetings. Local officials need to create better systems to ensure access to public meetings using hybrid formats, improved websites, and accessible documents. This is not just about ADA compliance - this is about inclusion in our democratic process for all.



Photo: Kate Larose



Scan this code to watch the panel on Olmstead and disability justice from the HRC's 2025 Civil Rights Summit.

14. CREATE AN OLMSTEAD COMMISSION

In 1999, a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision (called “Olmstead”) declared that unjustified segregation of individuals with disabilities violated the ADA. Vermont developed an Olmstead Plan to systemically prevent unnecessary institutionalization. This Plan has not been updated since 2006. In the meantime, the incarceration of people with disabilities has increased. Vermonters with disabilities have waited too long for their State to act. We urge lawmakers to create a permanent Olmstead Commission to study and report on this issue in FY27.

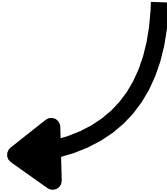
15. GUARANTEE A LIVABLE WAGE FOR IN-HOME CARE PROVIDERS

Many people with disabilities in Vermont rely on in-home care providers to enable them to remain housed in their communities rather than institutionalized. Yet, in-home care providers receive minimal training and very low wages. These crucial service workers deserve a livable wage to ensure that they can continue to serve individuals with disabilities and support themselves. We endorse the implementation of a statewide livable wage for in-home care providers.

Photo: Sarah Launderville and Lindsay St. Amour



Scan this code to watch the 80-minute panel on incarceration from the HRC's 2025 Civil Rights Summit.



JUSTICE FOR ALL

Civil rights advocates resoundingly call for immediate legislative action on a variety of matters related to racial justice, equal rights, policing, and incarceration..

16. PASS THE EQUAL PROTECTION CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

Vermont needs an Equal Protection amendment to its Constitution. P.R. 4 advanced in the last biennium, and needs to pass in 2026 in order to be ratified by Vermont voters. This assures us that even if federal constitutional protections erode, we can still rely on fundamental equal protection under Vermont law.

17. REPLACE INCARCERATION WITH ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORT

Our prison system perpetuates harm, violence, and systemic racism. We call on policymakers to increase resources for community-supported programs and education, and invest in transformative justice centers across the state, rather than continuing to rely on the flawed corrections system to address societal problems.

Photo: Kelly Poupore, Tabitha Moore, and Lisa Ryan



18. INCREASE TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR FAIR AND IMPARTIAL POLICING

Vermonters are proud of the progress we have seen with implementation of the Fair and Impartial Policing Policy. To continue to advance the purpose of this policy, we must ensure that all law enforcement officers in Vermont receive ongoing, comprehensive training about the policy, as well as de-escalation and trauma. Local law enforcement also needs to increase resources towards wrap-around, non-carceral supports for individuals in crisis. Finally, more accountability and data are needed to measure success in this area.



Photo: Jayna Ahsaf



Photo:
Rev. Arnold I. Thomas



Photo: Karim Chapman

Scan these codes to watch the three 80-minute panels on Vermont's Let's Talk Race project, the Raise Up Justice Agenda, and Fair and Impartial Policing from the HRC's 2025 Civil Rights Summit.

EDUCATION EQUITY

Discrimination, harassment, and other inequities continue to plague Vermont's school systems. While many leaders have focused on the cost of public education in Vermont, they have failed to ensure equitable access and treatment for all students. Community experts recommend the following:

19. ENSURE EFFECTIVE STATEWIDE HARASSMENT PREVENTION PROGRAMS, TRAINING, AND TOOLS

The Agency of Education has not implemented a meaningful statewide harassment prevention program to support schools in this crucial equity work, despite calls to do so for the past 25+ years. We urge lawmakers to mandate and fund such a program.

20. INCREASE ACCESS TO PUBLIC DATA ABOUT HHB

Without readily available, reliable data about instances of HHB (Hazing, Harassment, and Bullying) in Vermont schools, we cannot understand the scope of the problem, nor can we measure the effectiveness of any programs, training, or policies. We must require each school to comprehensively report on this information, and ensure that the Agency of Education makes that information available online.

Photo: Esther Charlestin





21. SUPPORT SCHOOLS IN IMPLEMENTING NEW EDUCATION QUALITY STANDARDS

New education quality standards, including those relating to equity and ethnic studies, went into effect in 2026 - yet schools have been given little if any support in bringing those standards into the classroom. Educators and students need guidance, support, and resources to make these standards a reality.

22. REMOVE THE “SEVERE OR PERVASIVE” HARASSMENT STANDARD IN 16 VSA §570f

While the “severe or pervasive” standard for unlawful harassment has been eliminated in all other public settings, employment, and housing, it remains an excessive burden for students who experience harassment in schools. It is time to abolish this unnecessary standard.

23. EXPAND REPRESENTATION AND ROLE OF THE HHB ADVISORY COUNCIL

Introduced in 2025, H.130 seeks to expand representation on the HHB Advisory Council to include more voices from the community, students, and education professionals. It also expands the role of the Council, so that it could make a more significant impact on actually preventing HHB.



Scan this code to watch the 80-minute panel on education equity from the HRC's 2025 Civil Rights Summit.

Photos: Mary Gannon and Wilmer Chavarria



WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

This report would not have been possible without the expertise and support of community partners, including the Office of Racial Equity, ACLU-VT, BROCC Community Action, CVOEO, Disability Rights VT, Education Justice Coalition, End Homelessness Vermont, FreeHer Vermont, GLAD Law, LGBTQIA Alliance of Vermont, MadFreedom Advocates, Migrant Justice, Outright Vermont, Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, the Vermont Attorney General's Office Civil Rights Unit, Vermont Asylum Assistance Project, Vermont Center for Independent Living, the Vermont Commission on Women, the Vermont Criminal Justice Council, the Vermont Immigrant Legal Defense Fund, Vermont Legal Aid, Vermont Psychiatric Survivors, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance, the Vermont State Refugee Office, Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance, and other individual subject matter experts to whom we are very grateful.



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To see the complete playlist of videos of all 15 panels from the HRC's 2025 Civil Rights Summit, scan this QR code