

VHCB Testimony 2/13/26

Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Erin Fernandez and I'm the executive director for Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports, an organization that has provided access to sports and outdoor recreation for people with disabilities for nearly 40 years. We serve Vermonters as well as those who come to our state to travel, recreate and relax. Programs we offer include—skiing, snowboarding, mountain biking, cycling, paddling, hiking, Veteran-specific programs, wellness retreats and anything that promotes holistic health. In 2025, Vermont Adaptive provided more than 5,700 outings throughout the year in dozens of locations across the state. With our program expansion in 2025 to Stratton Mountain, Bromley Mountain, and the Southern Vermont region, we anticipate that number growing to nearly 7,000 outings in 2026.

In addition, we offered more than \$230,000 in scholarships in 2025 - eliminating the financial barrier to outdoor recreation is embedded in our mission. More than 450 volunteer instructors and guides are at the core of our programming, donating nearly 10,000 hours annually in order for Vermont Adaptive to provide the programming that it does.

I'm here today to strongly support continued funding for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and to share how VHCB's recent investment has helped Vermont Adaptive bring to fruition a recent project that combines conservation, housing, workforce development, recreation, access, and economic impact in a thoughtful and strategic way.

A few months ago, VHCB invested over \$700,000 to support Vermont Adaptive's acquisition of a 125-acre property in Rochester, VT, which will become our new Adaptive Outdoor Recreation and Retreat Center. This facility will be the first-of-its-kind in the state and will be unique regionally and nationally as well.

Through a partnership with the Vermont Land Trust, more than 100 acres of this property are being permanently conserved, protecting working landscapes, wildlife habitat, and the recreational access and character of this place forever.

The remaining portion of the land will be developed intentionally to support year-round adaptive recreation for all the populations of people with disabilities we work with, including Veterans. While this land and property will serve for day programs and multi-day retreats, it also will remain accessible to the public for active recreation. Trails, facilities, and programs will welcome people who are often excluded from outdoor spaces. We have been working on securing a piece of property in this region for a few years and are grateful to the Vermont Land Trust and the VHCB. Without their partnerships, this project would not have been possible.

The new Vermont Adaptive Outdoor Center is a clear example of thoughtful, strategic conservation that improves the quality of life for individuals for future generations and helps to ensure equitable access to the outdoors for all Vermonters, including those with disabilities.

This is not conservation in conflict with community needs. It strengthens the Rochester community and its identity, and is a project that will support a rural community through local restaurants, shops, and other local businesses on a year round basis.

Like many organizations across Vermont, Vermont Adaptive is too navigating the reality of the state's affordable housing crisis. Recruiting and retaining staff—especially interns and early-career professionals—has become increasingly difficult due to the lack of available and affordable housing. With limited or no options available in VT they go where the affordable/ free intern housing options are: Colorado and Utah.

The farmhouse on this Rochester property is a critical part of the solution.

Vermont Adaptive will use the farmhouse to provide free housing for interns, many of whom come from out of state to gain specialized training in adaptive sports, outdoor education, healthcare, and nonprofit leadership. Many completing critical clinical work required to achieve a Certified Recreational Therapist.

To make this possible, we are leveraging additional public investment through a Northern Border Regional Commission Catalyst Grant, which is helping fund:

- necessary repairs, efficiency improvements and accessibility upgrades on the farmhouse
- Infrastructure that supports year-round use
- develop outdoor camping, retreat, and recreational spaces, expanding the site's capacity to serve participants, staff, and community partners.

Leveraged together, these investments turn a conserved property into a functional workforce development and community asset.

This is how smart public funding works best—each partner playing a distinct role, each dollar building on the last. Some intern housing will be available in 2026, and this new adaptive outdoor center gives us the stability and capacity to continue growing responsibly, while improving program quality and accessibility year-round.

Vermont Adaptive is also a meaningful contributor to Vermont's economy—particularly through travel and tourism. Much of our work supports the tourism economy by maintaining scenic landscapes and access to trails, shorelines, and recreation areas, especially through this new property.

- More than 1 in 4 adults (**28.7 percent**) in the United States identify as having some type of disability.
- **24-25%** of Vermonters identify as having a disability
- Over **13 million** potential visitors with disabilities within a 5-hr drive

According to our newly released economic impact study conducted with CRO Planning & Design:

- Vermont Adaptive generates \$10.3 million in total economic output for the state each year
- We contribute \$6.1 million to Vermont's gross domestic product, accounting for nearly 0.3 percent of Vermont's entire outdoor recreation GDP
- Our work supports 72 jobs statewide, including 17 direct employees and 55 jobs supported indirectly across the Vermont economy

In fact, every dollar Vermont Adaptive spends generates more than one additional dollar in economic activity across Vermont.

Adaptive athletes don't travel alone - for example last winter Athlete traveling parties averaged 3.1 people per traveling party. They come with families, caregivers, and support networks—supporting lodging, restaurants, retail, and local businesses, often in rural communities and across all four seasons.

VHCB's investment helps anchor this economic activity in a conserved, permanent place.

Return on Public Investment

With a single coordinated effort, the state and its partners have achieved:

- Permanent conservation of over 100 acres
- Free workforce housing tied to skills training
- Expanded adaptive recreation access
- Job creation and statewide economic impact
- Energy-efficient, accessible infrastructure
- Leveraged federal and regional investment

This is exactly the kind of high-return, multi-benefit outcome VHCB was created to make possible.

I want to close with this:

“This is what supporting community vitality through smart public investment looks like—conserved land, workforce housing, expanded access, and a \$10 million annual return for Vermont’s economy.”

At a time when Vermont is navigating housing shortages, workforce constraints, and economic uncertainty, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board remains one of the most effective tools this legislature has.

On behalf of Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports—and the thousands of Vermonters and visitors we serve each year—I urge you to continue investing in VHCB.

Thank you for your time. I’m happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Erin Fernandez
Executive Director, Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports