



State of Vermont
Human Rights Commission
12 Baldwin Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-6301
www.hrc.vermont.gov

Big Hartman, Esq.
Executive Director & General Counsel
big.hartman@vermont.gov

TO: House Committee on General and Housing
FROM: Big Hartman, Esq., Human Rights Commission
DATE: April 3, 2025
RE: Written Testimony of the Human Rights Commission re: H.169

Dear Chair Mihaly and Members of the Committee,

The mission of the State of Vermont Human Rights Commission is to advance full civil and human rights in Vermont. Our office enforces the Vermont Fair Housing and Public Accommodations Act and is tasked with advising the legislature on improvements needed for human rights in Vermont.

H.169 makes significant progress for Vermont in ensuring that the immigrant community has fair access to opportunities in this State. This bill has resounding support from Vermonters across the state who are members of that community, and organizations who serve them, including Migrant Justice, the Vermont Asylum Assistance Project, the State of Vermont Office of Racial Equity, the Center for Justice Reform Clinic, ACLU-VT, Voices for Vermont's Children, the Central Vermont Refugee Action Network, and many others. Like them, we see that the opportunities for non-citizens who live, work, and have families here in Vermont are severely limited by numerous barriers, including discrimination. For too long, migrant workers have been forced to inhabit substandard and immoral conditions in housing. Existing laws have not effectively prevented this unjust reality. These members of our community need Vermont's policymakers to stand up and support them in having the same human rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness that all others are guaranteed by our laws.

The Human Rights Commission unequivocally supports adding legal protections prohibiting discrimination based on citizenship and immigration status to Vermont's Fair Housing and Public Accommodations Act. As New York and California have recognized, protections against discrimination based on national origin are not sufficient to protect our most marginalized and mistreated community members. For example, depending on how national origin protections are interpreted, they may not reach a situation where a housing provider refuses to rent to anyone who has a work visa or a green card, or who is lawfully seeking asylum. Similarly, without the protections in Section 3 of H.169, there may not be anything to prevent a business owner from refusing to serve customers who are not



citizens. Vermont's anti-discrimination protections, as they currently exist, are not adequate to ensure equal access to housing and other opportunities for all. Including citizenship and immigration status as legally protected categories will send a resounding message of support for the immigrant community right now, and enable the HRC to more actively protect their rights to housing and public accommodations for decades to come.

The HRC also supports Section 1 of the bill, which prohibits landlords from requesting Social Security numbers in housing applications. When housing providers require a person to provide a Social Security number as part of a housing application, they create an immediate bar for many immigrants. Individuals may be dissuaded from applying for the housing, or be fearful of disclosing that they do not have a Social Security number. If Vermont law permits a Social Security number to be requested, or required, as a condition of eligibility for housing, then that law is in effect denying housing opportunities to many immigrants. For this reason, we believe that Section 1 of the bill is an appropriate measure to protect against discrimination.

Finally, there is no reason to believe that passing H.169 into law will lead to a rash of frivolous lawsuits against banks or landlords. Numerous studies and reports indicate that a majority of discrimination and hate incidents go unreported and unchallenged in court. Often, people who experience discrimination do not file any type of complaint or lawsuit because they fear retaliation, don't know their rights, or because they do not believe that our legal systems will adequately address the discrimination. Importantly, most people who file complaints at the HRC have no resources for an attorney, and their access to the civil justice system is severely hampered. Based on these considerations, we do not see a significant risk of baseless discrimination lawsuits stemming from these new protections.

As anti-immigration sentiment nationwide is being fueled by hateful rhetoric, false stereotypes, and narratives of prejudice, State anti-discrimination laws are needed now more than ever. H.169 represents an important step toward effectively protecting against the denial of opportunities based on anti-immigrant stigmas and biases. We urge your committee to move this bill forward as introduced, and resoundingly demonstrate your support for human rights for all people who work and live in Vermont.