



DISABILITY RIGHTS VERMONT TESTIMONY
House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs
March 11, 2026
Bill H.901

An act relating to inclusion of disability expertise in State, regional, and municipal emergency management

Good morning, thank you for inviting Disability Rights Vermont to speak today on this extremely important topic of emergency preparedness and the inclusion of people with disabilities and agencies with expertise in providing disability advocacy services in the planning phase. DRVT is the Protection & Advocacy agency for the State of Vermont, and as such, we are here today in support of this proposed legislation.

My name is Tina Hagen, I am the Senior Investigator and Compliance Officer for DRVT, and I have been with the organization for 26 years. Aside from my role with DRVT, I also have 17 years of prior experience volunteering in varying emergency management roles, including serving on the State Emergency Response Commission, as Chair of Disaster Services for the Northern Vermont Chapter of the American Red Cross, and served as Chair of the Local Emergency Planning Committee #9 (Caledonia and Essex Counties). I have had many years of experiences of disaster response and recovery in Vermont and have seen the impact it has on those who are affected and have witnessed the issues and barriers that often surface in the aftermath.

Advocates across Vermont have been working tirelessly behind the scenes for many years, trying to bring attention to the needs of the differently abled populations of Vermont to ensure that no one is left behind before, during or after a disaster. The fact that we are still having to ask towns and State governments across Vermont to learn and understand their responsibilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and other relevant laws – not only related to emergency management but across all aspects of town government - is extremely discouraging and concerning. Without direct input from



the disability community, it is impossible for non-disabled planners to truly understand the survival needs of people with disabilities during a disaster.

Our state is no stranger to severe weather-related emergencies. Vermont has experienced at least 21 federally declared disasters since 2013. The Burlington Free Press noted in a story in 2023 that Vermont at that time was the 7th most disaster-prone state in the nation. The time is now for more inclusive planning.

According to the National Council on Disabilitiesⁱ, during an emergency or major disaster people with physical, sensory, mental, or cognitive disabilities are disproportionately impacted. Despite this, the needs of people with disabilities are being overlooked in disaster management policy and planning.

In the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene in 2011, DRVT and the Vermont Chapter of the American Red Cross entered into a partnership to focus on the accessibility of services during times of disaster for individuals with disabilities, specifically focusing on the accessibility of emergency shelter sites. Also providing training for disaster volunteers on disability etiquette and understanding their responsibilities under the ADA in providing accessible services to individuals with disabilities.

In 2012, DRVT applied for and received grant funding from the Vermont Department of Public Safety which allowed us to conduct ADA accessibility surveys of emergency shelters. Our surveys identified accessibility barriers which were then reported to the State and Red Cross for planning purposes. Unfortunately, that funding ended a few years later and as a result many shelters were not surveyed.

DRVT has a unique perspective as an agency that has experience in the civil rights of people with disabilities, resources within the disability community and experience with disaster case management, state emergency operations, and collaboration with volunteer organizations. As a member of the largest legally based disability network mandated by Congress, DRVT has expertise that could be a valuable source of knowledge and assistance to disaster officials.



DRVT is not the only organization with valuable insight. Vermont is very fortunate to have many dedicated and passionate community organizations who are able to step up and support individuals before, during and after a disaster or emergency response.

The inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the planning efforts across the State to ensure that relevant laws and regulations are integrated into those plans are civil rights and disability rights issues. Without the disability community at the table, disaster preparedness plans are likely to be inadequate and life-threatening.

It is imperative that H.901 is passed so that Vermont can become more proactive and inclusive in providing emergency services across the board and so that no one is left behind or harmed in the process. Thank you.

ⁱ <https://www.ncd.gov/report/the-impacts-of-extreme-weather-events-on-people-with-disabilities/>