

Testimony to the Vermont Legislature: S.298 and the Disability Vote

To: House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs

From: Maria Rinaldi

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I. The Foundation of Inherent Dignity

Good morning, members of the Committee. It is so nice to see a few familiar faces here today.

My name is **Maria Rinaldi**. I am a lifelong Vermonter, a dedicated employee of Saint Michael's College, a founding member of the Town of Jericho's DEI Committee, a member of the RevUP Vermont leadership team, and the musical director of Vermont's Freedom & Unity Chorus. I am also paralyzed from the chest down and navigate the world in a power chair.

I am here today with my colleagues representing the leadership team of **REV UP Vermont**. We are a nonpartisan campaign from the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) that stands for "**Register, Educate, Vote, Use your Power!**" We are one of 21 chapters across the nation with a [shared mission](#) to build the power of the disability vote through increasing civic engagement in the disability community and improving the accessibility of elections.

My worldview was shaped by the Edmundite priests at St. Mike's, who teach a simple but radical truth: **Dignity is not something you earn; it is something you are born with.** I am here today because our current voting system fails to reflect that inherent dignity for all Vermonters.

II. The National Threat: A Roadmap of Exclusion

We are currently operating in a national climate that is increasingly hostile toward the disabled community. We have witnessed the sitting President mock a reporter's disability and claim that disabled Americans are "not smart enough" to handle complex roles, such as air traffic controllers. We

have even heard the baseless claim that the disabled are being “used” as pawns for voter fraud.

This isn't just hurtful rhetoric; it is a **policy roadmap**. There is a concerted effort at the federal level to dismantle **mail-in balloting**—the very tool that allows me and thousands of other disabled Vermonters to exercise our fundamental right to vote. If the federal “SAVE Act” passes, the national floor for voting rights will drop.

S.298 must be Vermont’s firewall. By explicitly adding people with disabilities as a protected class, you ensure that our dignity is not subject to the whims of federal interference.

III. The Jericho Model vs. The 68% Barrier

I don’t just advocate for change; I help build it. As a founding member of the **Jericho DEI Committee**, we addressed the exclusionary nature of our Town Meeting head-on.

We preserved the dialogue of Town Meeting, allowing people to have their say, but moved the final budget vote to an Australian ballot. The results were undeniable: voter participation increased significantly.

However, Jericho is the exception. Currently, **68% of Vermont towns** still require in-person floor votes.

IV. The Specific Legislative Requests

We are here with three specific asks for this committee regarding **S.298**:

1. **Expand Section 2801 (Definitions):** Formally include "disability" as a Protected Class, as you have so recently added.
2. **Restore the Private Right of Action:** We urge you to restore the provisions that allow for a private right of action. This is a foundational pillar of the federal **Voting Rights Act**. Restoring this ensures that Vermonters have the legal standing to defend their own constitutional rights when they are infringed upon.

3. **Codify Universal Mail-In Ballots:** We must protect the mail-in system from federal interference. By codifying this in S.298, you ensure that no matter what happens in Washington, D.C., a disabled Vermonter's kitchen table remains a valid and protected polling place.

V. Conclusion: Fulfilling the Promise

We aren't here to burn the system down—we are here to fulfill its promise.

The federal SAVE Act is a storm on the horizon, but the barriers in 68% of our towns are a storm that is already here. I urge this committee to pass S.298 as a shield for all Vermonters. Let our actions reflect our belief that the right to vote is as inherent as the dignity we are born with.