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Sarah Clark, Secretary

TO: Rep. Theresa Wood, Chair, and Members of the House Committee on Human Services
FROM: Jeffrey Mbarushina, Policy and Research Analyst
DATE: April 13, 2026
RE: ORE's Formal Request for Working Group Membership – S. 239, An Act Relating to the Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Working Group

The Office of Racial Equity (ORE) submits this memorandum to formally express its strong support for S.239 and to respectfully request that ORE be included as a member of the Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Working Group not as a consulted entity in the final bill language. ORE understands that the committee's strike-all draft, reviewed on April 10, 2026, places ORE in Subsection C (consult with) rather than Subsection B (working group members). ORE asks that this be corrected before the bill is voted out of committee, consistent with the committee's earlier acceptance of Senator Martine Gulick's recommendation that ORE have a seat at the table.

Why ORE's Membership in the Working Group Is Necessary

Vermont's mandatory reporting system does not operate neutrally across race, income, and family structure. Research and practice consistently show that families experiencing poverty - which in Vermont, as nationally, disproportionately includes Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color are over-represented in child abuse and neglect reports, investigations, and family separations, relative to their share of the general population and relative to the actual prevalence of child maltreatment. A working group charged with examining who is required to report, when they must report, and what alternatives exist to reporting cannot produce recommendations that are durable, just, or effective if racial equity analysis is relegated to an optional consultation. The presence of a racial equity perspective must be embedded in the working group's deliberative process, not available on request. Vermont is a national outlier in its rate of reports per thousand in the population, and the data show the state underperforms on supportive services that can prevent the circumstances that lead to reporting in the first place. ORE's membership in this working group is the mechanism by which equity analysis becomes part of the solution, not an afterthought.

ORE's role would not be to represent any single community or to advocate for a predetermined outcome. Rather, ORE would bring to the working group the analytical capacity

to examine whether reporting rates, outcomes, and the distribution of supportive services vary by race, ethnicity, income, or other protected characteristics; to identify statutory definitions or thresholds that may produce racially disparate application; and to ensure that any recommended alternatives to reporting are designed with equitable access in mind across Vermont's diverse and geographically dispersed communities.

ORE also brings direct experience with the institutional dynamics the working group will navigate. ORE staff have tracked and engaged with Vermont's child welfare system through the lens of Act 154 and the broader national movement toward family-supportive approaches to child safety. This work has made clear that the most important equity question S.239 presents is not only what the law says but how it operates in practice, for which families, and with what consequences. ORE is positioned to help the working group ask and answer those questions with rigor and clarity.

ORE's Formal Request

ORE respectfully requests that the committee make the following change to the strike-all draft before the bill is voted out of committee: move the Office of Racial Equity from Subsection C (consult with) to Subsection B (working group members), consistent with the committee's prior markup decisions and Senator Gulick's recommendation. ORE is prepared to commit the time, staff capacity, and analytical resources necessary to participate fully in the working group's charge through October 1, 2027, final report deadline.

ORE is grateful for the House Human Services Committee's thoroughness in constructing a working group that centers lived experience, brings in mandated reporters from multiple sectors, and charges the group with examining whether Vermont's current system is achieving the outcomes children and families deserve. We look forward to contributing to that work as a full member of the group. Please do not hesitate to contact ORE with any questions.

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