

Disability Advocacy Day

Testimony before the Senate Transportation Committee

February 11, 2026

I'm Peter Johnke, Deputy Director for the Vermont Center for Independent Living. Thanks for taking the time today to incorporate the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights. VCDR is a member organization, made up of disability rights organizations around the state. VCIL is a member of the organization, and we work in coalition to advancing the human and civil rights of individuals with disabilities, ensuring their full and equal participation in all aspects of community life and the political process.

Our theme this year is to write disability rights into every law. Our hope is that as the legislature you consider people with disabilities when putting together bills and ask for people with disabilities to come and share how legislation will impact them directly. I am a "carless traveler" and advocate for public transit for people with disabilities.

When we say, “write disability rights into every bill,” we mean making accessibility and nondiscrimination an explicit, operable part of policy design and implementation, not just an implied requirement after-the-fact.

In transportation, that typically means:

- **Accessible infrastructure by default (sidewalks, crossings, bus stops, shelters, detours during construction, winter maintenance plans, work zones).**
- **Procedural rights and accountability (meaningful engagement, notice, data, and a clear place to elevate problems when decisions reduce access).**

Specific language we would like to see

Here are examples of language that can be dropped into many transportation bills (tailored as needed):

- **Disability Rights and Access Review (a “disability impact statement”)**

The Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) shall, prior to implementation, evaluate whether this act will increase, decrease, or have no impact on access for Vermonters with disabilities, including access to employment, health care, essential shopping, and

community life; and shall consult with disability stakeholders on any identified risk of reduced access.

This has recently been a big issue with transportation to employment. In Green Mountain Transits service area only medical trips are being provided. VCIL has received numerous calls because our peers could no longer get to their employment. Alternatives were explored but the person works 10-3, so it didn't fit commuting hours. There were 9 people in Colchester alone, who lost rides to employment. Fortunately, the town of Colchester agreed to provide additional funding to GMT, so at least those trips were restored. How many other can no long get to work.

- Codify meaningful notice and stakeholder process when access is reduced**
- *Any statewide or regional change that restricts trip purposes, trip frequency, or eligibility within publicly funded mobility programs shall include advance notice to riders and partner agencies, a documented rationale, and a process to ensure the smallest possible negative impact on riders who rely on the service for essential life activities.***

This is especially relevant because the Committee has

heard how the Older Adults and Persons with Disabilities Transportation Program is “the most unpredictable” program and is routinely adjusted as needs shift (for example, new dialysis riders).

- Protect access to work and community integration as transportation outcomes**
- Federal guidance for the Older Adults and Persons with Disabilities Transportation Program recognizes vocational and social/personal trips as eligible trip purposes. However, local proposals have eliminated recurring work trips for riders and proposed caps can cut off vocational access.**
- Program administration shall include explicit consideration of access to employment and community participation for riders with disabilities when setting trip priorities and constraints.**

What is missing from typical Legislative Counsel language in our experience, current bill language often:

- Assumes compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) but does not *operationalize* it (no required review, no measurable outcomes, no process when access is reduced).**

- **Treats service reductions as purely administrative, even when they function like a rights restriction (for example, short notice trip cancellations and the uneven incentives/financial risk described by local partners).**
- **Does not consistently protect access to work/community life, even though eligible trip purposes include vocational and social/personal trips.**

We have also had complaints about reduction in social trips. We know how important social interaction is to health. This is so important that I want to share my personal situation. My wife has moderate dementia. Fortunately, she can be alone by herself while I am at work. I do have to assist with medication and meals. She's quite lonely. Therefore, when she has an appointment, I try to schedule them before or after lunch, so that we can go out to eat. This way she gets out of the house at least twice a month.

Without life experience the need for accessibility can be forgotten or is an afterthought. Another way to write

disability into the law is to include inclusive language when stating the purpose of the bill and in definitions.

For example: S. 146 - An act relating to transportation demand management plans.

Page 1, line 17 reads: (3) "Transportation demand management" or "TDM" means measures 18 that reduce vehicle miles traveled. Examples include telecommuting; 19 incentives to carpool, walk, bicycle, or ride public transit; and staggered work 20 shifts. The word accessible should come before transportation. So it would read "Accessible Transportation demand management"...

I'd also like to share my thoughts about Senate Bill 75.

In general, I support this bill. I applaud the additional funding for public transit providers for this fiscal year. Already, service has been cut, especially in the Older Persons and Persons with Disabilities (O&D) Program. As a person with a disability, living in East Calais with no regular public transportation, this is a vital service for me. Not just for health care appointments, but also for shopping and social engagement, which should be considered essential services.

After many years of study, I am pleased that a new funding stream for public transportation services has been proposed. Having a robust public transit system benefits everyone. Less burning of fossil fuels equals a cleaner environment and better health for everyone. So, this fee would be considered equitable. While I support this legislation, I do have some concerns that it may disproportionately impact people with disabilities and others living in rural areas. Since I do not drive, I frequently order items for delivery. Based on 2025 orders, the package delivery would have cost me about \$1.50 a month. I, personally, am glad to support public transportation in this way, but for many people with disabilities, on fixed incomes, this would be a hardship. I commute to work in Montpelier using rideshare and can walk in Montpelier for grocery shopping and going to the pharmacy before or after work, but also getting to Walmart is not possible, thus ordering on-line.

How would this work with services like DoorDash? Since food is not taxable, it's not subject to the delivery fee. What if I have non-food items in my order (i.e. a roll of toilet paper). Would I have to pay 30 cents on that item?

Time permitting a little show & tell:

As mentioned earlier, accessible infrastructure is needed. When it comes to sidewalks this is crucial. Navigating sidewalks in the winter is so difficult for me, and I'm walking. For anyone using a mobility device it can be dangerous and potentially damage their wheelchair. Then they have to go without until they can get it repaired, which can take months

With my vision loss I don't have depth perception. It's hard for me to gage the height of piles of snow, especially when getting on or off a bus. I was tired of falling so many times, so now I carry my own shovel.

I'm happy to answer any questions, and again thanks for having me this morning.