

March 7, 2025

Senate & House Committees on Government Operations

Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

VIA EMAIL

Re: Urgent Request to Schedule Testimony on S.56 & H.375

Dear Leaders of the VT Senate & House Committees on Government Operations:

We, the undersigned organizations, urge you to schedule testimony on companion bills **S.56** and **H.375**, respectively, before the crossover deadline on March 14, 2025. These bipartisan bills present Vermont with a strategic opportunity to **secure a sustainable, well-coordinated future for immigrant workforce integration**, ensuring that all foreign-born residents—crucial stakeholders in the [Vermont Futures Project's Economic Action Plan](#)—can thrive.

Securing and expanding existing state-based immigrant service coordination through S.56 and H.375 presents a **crucial opportunity to secure Vermont's economic and social future by securing an Office of New Americans (ONA) equivalent in state government**. Without action, the proposed legislation will stall for a second year, leaving Vermont's refugee service coordination vulnerable to federal disruptions and missing a critical opportunity to build a more integrated, sustainable future for all.

Vermont's economic vitality depends on immigrant workers. Immigrants are the fastest-growing working-age demographic in our state, 80% more likely to start businesses, and essential to filling critical workforce gaps. They contribute approximately \$226.3 million in federal and state taxes and wield \$619.9 million in spending power. However, many face barriers such as licensing restrictions, language access, and fragmented services, all of which limit their ability to fully integrate and contribute. **Without a clear, statewide strategy, these challenges will persist, exacerbating workforce shortages and increasing the cost of living for all Vermonters.**

While Vermont has long welcomed immigrants, particularly the subpopulation of refugees, its infrastructure for supporting them remains incomplete. The State Refugee Office at AHS, under Tracy Dolan's leadership, has significantly improved efficiency across government branches and civil society. However, this federally funded office focuses on the refugee subpopulation and is now at risk due to federal divestment. **S.56 and H.375 provide a practical, low-cost solution by strengthening this existing office's mandate**, ensuring its expertise benefits all of Vermont's foreign-born residents including asylum seekers, migrant workers, entrepreneurs, and beyond.

Following the **successful models of ONAs in nearby Maine, Massachusetts, and New York—as well as those of Republican-majority governments in North Dakota, Ohio, and Michigan**—Vermont's ONA could centralize intake, referrals, information sharing, and service coordination, reducing redundancy and maximizing efficiency. A longitudinal study by Vermont Poverty Law Fellow Maya Tsukazaki has already identified key systemic barriers to more effective immigrant workforce integration and actionable recommendations, while over 400 service providers at Vermont's

inaugural Welcoming New Americans Symposium last summer documented urgent needs and solutions that an ONA equivalent would alleviate. Legislative actions such as Act 105 (2024), which removes immigration-based licensing barriers, demonstrate **Vermont's readiness to take further steps toward comprehensive immigrant workforce integration.**

Last but not least, investing in S.56 and H.375 is a sound economic decision. The 2019 Economic Impacts of Civil Legal Assistance Programs Report found that every \$1 spent on quality, coordinated service delivery yields an \$11 return by maximizing spending power and reducing costs associated with housing instability and emergency services. By passing S.56/H.375, Vermont will join nearly half the states in leveraging existing resources and partnerships to ensure a sustainable future through coordinated workforce integration.

We urge you to act now to protect and expand Vermont's capacity to support its newest residents. Please schedule hearings for S.56 and H.375 and move this vital legislation forward. We enclose letters of support from leaders and constituents across Vermont.

Respectfully submitted,

Jill Martin Diaz, Esq.,

on behalf of [the undersigned organizations](#), contactable at ONAO Outreach@vaapvt.org

Alison Segar, Director, **Vermont Language Justice Project**

Alison Zenie, Executive Director, **Central Vermont Refugee Action Network**

Brian Lowe, Member, **VT Treasurer's Task Force on the Federal Transition**

Dorigen Keeney, Co-President, **Johnson Food Shelf**

Ellen Green, Executive Director, **Bridge to Rutland**

Falko Schilling, Advocacy Director, **ACLU VT**

Francie Marbury, Board Chair, **Community Asylum Seekers Project**

Isaiah Gonzales, Law Student, **VLGS Latin American and Caribbean Law Students Association**

Jan Steinbauer, Laurel Shelmandine, **Chittenden Asylum Seekers Assistance Network**

Jill Martin Diaz, Executive Director, **Vermont Asylum Assistance Project**

Jo Yoder, Volunteer, **Bridges to Rutland**

Joanne O'Connor, Co-Lead, **Bennington County Indivisible**

Kathryn Grover, Author, ***Windsor's Warsaw: The History of a Workers' Neighborhood***

Libby Hillhouse, President, **Northeast Kingdom Asylum Assistance Network**

Mary Jo Patchett, Program Manager, **Richmond Food Shelf & Thrift Store**

Moira Feldman, Community Orientation Program Coordinator, **The Janet S. Munt Family Room**

Molly Gray, Executive Director, **Vermont Afghan Alliance**

Monica Allard, Co-Founder, **Vermont Queer Legal Professionals**

Paul Dragon, Executive Director, **Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity**

Phoebe Zorn, Executive Director, **Pride Center of Vermont**

Richard Hecht, Mediator, **RoundTable Resolution**

Rachel Elliot, Asylum Coordinator, **Migrant Justice VT/Justicia Migrante VT**

Robert Nick Krembs, Board Chair, **Supporting and Helping Asylum Seekers and Refugees**

Rosalie Wright-Lapin, Director of Social Services, **Connecting Cultures**

Ruth Steinmetz, Initiative Director, **Winooski Working Communities**

Willow O'Feral, Filmmaker/Founder, **Haptic Pictures**