

Good afternoon. My name is Sarah Launderville and I'm the Executive Director of the Vermont Center for Independent Living. VCIL is a statewide disability justice organization, and we are people with disabilities working together for dignity, independence and civil rights.

We're a proud member of the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights, in which I serve as the President. VCDR is a coalition of organizations throughout Vermont focused on protecting and advancing the rights of individuals with disabilities.

I'm also a person living with disabilities.

The theme this year for Disability Advocacy Day is "write disability rights into every bill". I want to thank this committee for being curious about that and inviting us to come and talk a little about that today.

VCDR has five principles including:

- Disability is a natural part of the human experience
- Putting community and supports before institutions
- Supporting self-determination and independent living
- Support community based living and peer support
- Dignity and respect for people with disabilities which includes access to education, housing, food, work and full inclusion

Nowhere is our theme more fitting than here, where you shape the rules of government, elections, transparency, emergency response, and local governance.

Unlike some other committees we're speaking in front of today that might not see a direct connection to our theme we know that in the past, you have written into language ways people with disabilities can engage. What I've experienced over the years is after it leaves the statehouse, the intent of inclusion is often met with defensiveness, and bias that is difficult for people with disabilities to navigate. We should continue to work on ways for people with disabilities to circle back.

Disabled Vermonters are one of the largest constituencies affected by how government operates: whether people can vote privately and independently; whether public meetings are accessible; whether emergency alerts and shelters serve everyone; whether administrative processes and charter changes include disability access; and whether state systems consider people living in poverty, using assistive technology, and navigating complex benefits.

My colleague Laura is going to spend time talking about our community's experience with voting and local elections and I won't spend a lot of time on that, with one exception.

It's essential that people with lived experience of disability, especially those currently facing barriers to voting, are genuinely heard and taken seriously. Too often, reports from leadership and testimony from professionals give the *appearance* of including the disability perspective. Real inclusion requires a different starting point. Asking *who faces the greatest barriers, and what would it take to ensure they can participate fully?* Build policy from that hardest-case scenario, rather than defaulting to "we've always done it this way" or "traditions" because that always excludes people with disabilities.

One example that comes up from time to time is the requirement to have signatures on a petition to get on a ballot. There is a large difference between an able-bodied individual being able to walk house to house compared to someone using a wheelchair who can't access individual homes because of the stairs in front of them.

We need to reconsider “tradition” and make processes accessible so our selectboards, school boards, legislature have more people participating with lived experience of disability.

Before moving towards new and exciting voting options, it would be important to acknowledge disabled voters already left out of systems and VCIL is in full support of statutory changes that will require that all municipal votes be taken by Australian ballot rather than floor votes, to ensure greater accessibility and participation in local democracy.

One issue we hear about at VCIL from different systems is about the process for providing a reasonable accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Senate Government Operations Committee is uniquely positioned to improve how reasonable accommodations under the ADA function across state government and Vermont’s municipalities. Many ADA-related problems such as inconsistent accommodation procedures, unclear timelines, inequitable access to public meetings, discrimination or uneven training among managers and municipal officials often stem from gaps in statewide policy rather than the ADA itself.

While some of this is in place, the committee could strengthen compliance by reviewing and establishing uniform statewide accommodation procedures for agencies and municipalities, requiring ADA and accessibility training for state and local officials, improving the visibility and authority of ADA coordinators, and standardizing accessibility expectations for public meetings, documents, and digital communications.

As the body responsible for public records, open meetings, elections, and local governance, the committee can also ensure that civic participation including voting, remote meeting access, and public information is fully accessible to disabled Vermonters.

So many of our systems rely heavily on volunteers in Vermont and while that is great, what often goes unaddressed is the harm that it can cause to different populations including people with disabilities.

When we bring up the issues we are most of the time met with defensiveness, or individual biases around disability. We hear comments, like well we didn't have time to get an ASL interpreter and "we're all in this together or we're just doing the best we can". We further see public entities presenting awards to these groups of people that have given so much in their volunteer efforts but often have created hardships for individuals with disabilities in their efforts. It's a hard conversation to have, but it needs to happen in preparation prior to the next emergency.

We're not saying that people shouldn't give their time and effort, but we are saying we need to be intentional in how to support that volunteer base and to have policies in place that protect individuals with disabilities if they have complaints.

Relying heavily on volunteers in emergency-management systems can unintentionally put people with disabilities at greater risk because volunteers often lack the training, consistency, and preparedness needed to meet disability-related needs during a crisis. Emergency response requires knowledge of accessible evacuation procedures, safe handling of mobility devices, communication with people who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or have intellectual or developmental disabilities, and understanding of medical, sensory, or other needs.

Volunteers who may be well-intentioned but untrained can easily overlook these requirements, leading to unsafe evacuations, the separation of individuals from essential equipment or caregivers, or the inability to communicate critical instructions in accessible formats.

Unlike professional responders, volunteers may not understand or be held to the same standards regarding confidentiality, ADA obligations, assistive-technology needs, service-animal protections, or how to maintain disability-related supports in chaotic conditions.

Additionally, volunteer-based systems often suffer from inconsistency, turnover, and availability problems. During large-scale floods, storms, or mass-evacuation events, disabled Vermonters may depend on predictable systems including transportation assistance, shelter accessibility, power for medical equipment, access to medication, or personal-care support.

The issues that arise can result in gaps in service, miscommunication, and delayed or denied assistance. In rural areas where Vermont relies especially heavily on volunteer emergency personnel these gaps can be even larger. Emergency management becomes unreliable when the backbone of the system is composed of people who can only help when they are available, who may not have ongoing ADA or disability-competency training, and who cannot provide sustained support throughout the duration of an emergency. For people with disabilities, unreliable systems can mean life-threatening consequences.

We really appreciate the opportunity to share some of these experiences with you all today and I look forward to connecting you with individuals with lived disability experiences in the future as you continue to do this important work.

Respectfully submitted:

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The mission of VCDR is to advance the human and civil rights of people with disabilities to ensure full and equal participation in all aspects of community life and the political process.