

To: Senate Committee on Government Operations
From: Aiden Otterman, Chair of Vermont State Youth Council,
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Good afternoon. I'd like to thank you for having us today. It's an honor to be back here advocating on behalf of the youth of our state. My name is Aiden Otterman, I live in West Topsham, and I am the Chair of the Vermont State Youth Council.

Founded in 2022 by legislative Act 109, the Vermont State Youth Council is a group of now 27 youth from all walks of life, from ages 11 to 18. The council further consists of five subcommittees: Equity and Anti-Racism, Climate Change, Youth Voice, Youth Mental Health, and Education. Committees are tasked with the creation of recommendations related to their committee focus, which are then voted on by the whole Council. From there, the council is tasked with providing these recommendations to Vermont's Governor and General Assembly, alongside recommendations in specific topics such as "the preservation of Vermont's traditions and the future of Vermont's rural character, activities, and professions" as well as "the participation of young persons in Vermont's economy and keeping young Vermonters in the State."

Over the past few years, the council has held a public hearing, sent multiple surveys to Vermont youth, written and revised bylaws, and presented to the General Assembly and the Governor on two occasions. This year, we have moved forward with a new strategy of recommendation creation and presentation, which would better align with the legislative biennium. This strategy consists of presenting recommendations at the start of the legislative biennium, leaving the latter half of the biennium has time to connect with legislators, write bills, and provide testimony.

The council has also been ramping up our outreach to youth constituents, and are planning to hold several public hearings during and after the current legislative session. The Vermont State Youth Council has been a key player in providing a platform for youth voice in government. It has allowed youth to have a real impact on each other and their futures as the leaders of tomorrow. The recommendations provided by the Council herein are a reflection of the most pressing issues affecting Vermont youth today.

As stated in the beginning of this testimony, the Vermont State Youth Council is also responsible for recommending based on keeping youth in state and our participation in the state economy. For that, we'd like to request that its federal funding be replaced by an appropriation of \$140,000 in State funds for FY27. Dedicated state funding will ensure youth council members have the right to fully express their identity and experiences, so they can truly represent the diversity and perspectives of young Vermonters. The total includes \$47,000 in youth stipends; venue expenses and mileage reimbursement for in-person meetings; and costs associated with the administrative and technical assistance of Vermont Afterschool in support of

the VSYC. Doing so would ensure youths' voices continue to be heard in the case of threats from federal funding cuts.

We further recommend the General Assembly create a state fund for affordable housing in the state. To support this fund, the General Assembly should consider installing an inheritance tax of 5% to be applied to Vermonters receiving an inheritance of \$250,000 or more. Another consideration would be to use revenue from the already existing estate tax for the affordable housing fund. This tax money will go into a state fund for affordable housing, using different strategies such as utilizing abandoned buildings and dorms when empty, or building up instead of out. By lowering home prices and expanding our supply, more young people would surely be inclined to stay in the state.

On the preservation of Vermont's Traditions and the Future of its Rural Character, Activities, and Professions, we recommend Vermont public schools educate students on the history and importance of Town Meeting Day in the days and weeks leading up to it, and strongly encourage students to attend. All in order to keep this centuries-old civic tradition alive for many more years. We also recommend that Vermont's public schools be required (and assisted) in providing free school meals to all K-12 students, and that they use a certain amount of food from local farms in school meals. We believe this would improve the health and food security of Vermont youth and to support Vermont's farming tradition. The council also has some already existing bills we would like to voice our support for, including:

H.30 - "An act relating to the use of seclusion and restraint on children and youth in the custody of the Department for Children and Families"

H.192 - "An act relating to prohibiting solitary confinement for children"

H.511 - "An act relating to the admittance of federal immigration authorities into schools"

H.640 - "An act relating to adding voting student members to school district boards"

Finally, the State Youth Council has a few updates and goals in order to be more responsive during the legislative session, increase input from youth, and focus more on advocacy. To better align with the Legislative schedule and have more time to advocate and connect with policymakers during the Legislative session, we are beginning to implement a strategy of creating biennial recommendations aligned with the legislative biennium. Last month, we launched our first newsletter for youth and youth groups who wish to stay updated on the council and increase youth feedback. Lastly, we are planning to hold at least two Public Hearings to gather information on what youth want and/or need in Vermont. This will greatly help to inform the Council's new biennial recommendations.

I'd like to thank the committee again for having us today. We look forward to continuing our work together for a better future for Vermont's youth.