

I am writing to provide clarification regarding recent testimony presented before the Senate Health & Welfare Committee concerning S.64. Certain statements contained misleading information that may affect understanding of access to timely eye care for Vermonters. Comments from the Vermont Medical Society and the Vermont Ophthalmological Society questioned the competence of optometrists, and the following information is offered to ensure accuracy.

Doctors of Optometry undergo extensive and rigorous training in ocular disease, diagnostics, and treatment. All accredited optometry programs include advanced clinical education and procedural training, including laser procedures. Optometrists complete nearly 10,000 hours of education and approximately 2,000 patient encounters before graduation, and they must fulfill ongoing continuing education requirements to maintain licensure.

The concerns raised in opposition testimony relied on isolated anecdotal cases that do not represent the profession as a whole. As in every medical discipline, occasional errors occur, including within ophthalmology. A 2024 study confirms the strong safety record of optometric care, with only two negative outcomes among more than 146,000 laser procedures performed by optometrists in the United States.

The central focus of S.64 is patient access to care. In a rural state such as Vermont, the limited availability of ophthalmologists can delay diagnosis and treatment. Allowing optometrists with the appropriate specialty license to practice to the full extent of their education and training can improve access, reduce wait times, and enable patients to receive care closer to home. Additionally, this framework may help Vermont remain competitive in attracting new graduates to address current and future workforce gaps. Supported by the Office of Professional Regulation (OPR), S.64 includes strong patient protections, such as licensure requirements, additional training, and regulatory oversight. The intent of this legislation is collaborative in nature. Optometry and ophthalmology function most effectively as complementary professions, working together to ensure that patients receive the right care at the right time.

Sincerely,

Randy Fitzgerald, OD