

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 (VCDR), 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.

And I'm also a person living with disabilities.

The theme this year for Disability Advocacy Day is "write disability rights into every bill." Thank you for being curious about that and agreeing for us to speak today.

VCDR has five principles:

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

These principles are particularly important here, because the bills you take up around public health, mental health, primary care, hospital oversight, and children's services directly shape whether disabled Vermonters can live safely, independently, and with dignity.

For the disability community access to immunizations matter deeply, as highlighted in H.545. After the state of emergency for the pandemic was lifted, VCIL peers struggled with access to immunizations because while the state had moved on from protections, those who remained immune compromised were less protected in public than before. Through a lot of hard work and gaining access to funds, VCIL operationalized the only statewide in-home vaccination program in Vermont, ensuring that people who could not leave their homes because of disabilities, chronic illness, immunodeficiency, or transportation barriers could still receive life-saving vaccines.

Many Vermonters told us it was the first time they had ever been included in a public-health response. Our teams traveled across every region of the state, providing vaccines in the home. If not available these peers would not have gotten a vaccine at all. This bill has a parallel in how people with disabilities, and others can be blocked and need access to vaccinations.

S.189 is another example of a bill that matters deeply to our community. When primary care practices shut down or relocate, the impact is not evenly felt and disabled Vermonters are often the first to lose access. VCIL recently received a call from an individual who suddenly lost their primary-care provider because the practice shut down. For someone with significant disabilities and transportation barriers who relies on regular care to manage chronic conditions, this isn't just an inconvenience, it is a complete loss of access.

Finally, I'd like to share parts of a story related to a bill that was passed last year protecting health care workers.

This past semester VCIL ran a paid internship where disabled students wrote stories about their experiences in school and other systems. A seventeen-year-old student wrote about experiences in a local emergency department while seeking support during a mental health crisis. This is a part of their story:

I have never screamed so loud in my entire life. My voice was already sore, but screaming for my mom and demanding the workers put me down, became the spectacle of that entire unit. After searching the room with my eyes, and seeing my mom nowhere in sight, I glanced up towards the ceiling. I could see two nurses smiling at each other, as if this was amusing for them. And that's when it hit me. None of these nurses cared about me, none of them physically stopped me from slamming my head against the wall, and now I was seen as a show pony for them in the hospital. I became enraged with anger and tripped the woman holding up my right leg. One of my limbs was actually in my control again.

Another nurse took the place of the woman I had tripped, and the man holding my left leg had repositioned his hand near my inner thigh. I started spacing out into a flashback again when I felt a tear in my shoulder. The pain continued but so did the flashback, my body was tired and exhausted from fighting everyone who was supposedly trying to help me. I remember passing out. I don't know how long I was out for, but I woke back up as we entered a room towards the back of the building. My arm was aching and I screamed that my arm hurt, the nurses lowered me onto a bed. I took my right arm from the woman restraining it, by pushing my arm towards me. To which, the nurse screamed to her coworkers that I had attempted to scratch her. She bent over, and screamed into my face that she was pressing charges.

To give a bit more context, the hospital had removed this teens mom from the room and when the mom arrived home after supporting the teen through crisis she was met with a phone call from the local police department with an officer wanting to come by and issue the citation to this seventeen year old who just spent the entire day trying to seek mental health treatment.

Last year's bill sought to create safety, yet it resulted in a vulnerable teenager being retraumatized. The workers also had thoughts that they can personally press charges which is not accurate and created a power dynamic that is troubling. The bias of people in mental health crisis continues to be very present. In addition, that teens personal information of why he was in the emergency department is also shared with the police and not protected and kept confidential.

This teen sought support from Disability Rights Vermont and the state attorney general decided to not bring charges, but if a parent is in a similar situation and doesn't understand they can ask questions or assert themselves the outcome can lead to the criminal justice system including a potential for jail time and fines.

This committee is so important in the lives of people and especially the lives of disabled people. I appreciate your work, and care in thinking through these systems. Thank you again for the opportunity to share today.

Respectfully submitted:

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