



Senate Committee on Judiciary
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

April 1, 2026

Vermont Legal Aid: Letter of Support for H.626 – An Act Relating to Sexual Extortion, Voyeurism, and Disclosure of Sexually Explicit Images Without Consent

Dear Chair Hashim and Members of the Committee:

Vermont Legal Aid strongly supports H.626, legislation that meaningfully strengthens Vermont’s criminal and civil responses to image-based abuse. From the perspective of legal practitioners working directly with low-income Vermonters - including survivors of domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and coercion - we see firsthand the profound and lasting harm caused by these forms of abuse and the significant gaps in current law that this bill seeks to address.

H.626 represents a thoughtful and necessary modernization of Vermont law in response to evolving technology and increasingly sophisticated forms of exploitation and abuse. It recognizes that harm today is not limited to physical spaces, but often occurs in digital environments where abuse can be amplified, prolonged, and nearly impossible to fully remedy without clear legal tools.

The Reality of Image-Based Abuse in Legal Practice

At Vermont Legal Aid, we work with people who come to us during some of the hardest moments of their lives. Many are survivors of abuse whose lives have been turned upside down by someone sharing intimate images without their consent, secretly recording them, or threatening to expose explicit images. We often see this happen in situations involving domestic and sexual violence, stalking and other forms of control. This kind of abuse is especially harmful because it doesn’t just happen once. Once an image is taken or shared, the harm can continue over time, leaving survivors feeling like they can never fully escape it.



From a practitioner's standpoint, current legal frameworks often fail to capture the scope and nature of this harm. Clients come to us seeking relief, only to encounter limitations in both criminal enforcement and civil remedies. H.626 directly addresses these gaps.

Strengthening Criminal Protections

H.626 improves Vermont's criminal statutes in several critical ways. First, the bill clarifies and strengthens the law on voyeurism by expanding definitions and prohibiting the intentional viewing, recording, or photographing of intimate areas without consent in circumstances where a person has a reasonable expectation of privacy. This clarification is essential. In practice, we see cases where harmful conduct falls into gray areas under existing law, making prosecution difficult or inconsistent.

Second, the bill strengthens protections against the non-consensual disclosure of sexually explicit images. Importantly, it recognizes that consent to the creation of an image does not equate to consent to its distribution. This distinction reflects the reality our clients face - many images are initially shared within relationships and later weaponized as a form of retaliation or control.

Third, H.626 creates a new offense of sexual extortion, criminalizing threats to disclose explicit images in order to coerce victims into providing money, engaging in sexual conduct, or complying with other demands. This is a critical addition. In our work, threats alone - without actual disclosure - are often the primary tool of coercion. Survivors may remain trapped in abusive situations because the threat of exposure is so powerful and immediate. Recognizing this conduct as a distinct crime aligns the law with how this type of coercive control actually operates.

Finally, the bill adjusts statutes of limitations for these offenses to reflect the delayed discovery that is common in image-based abuse cases. As practitioners, we routinely encounter situations where a client does not learn of the abuse until months or years after the initial act. Without this reform, survivors may be denied access to justice before they even know a crime has occurred.



Expanding Meaningful Civil Remedies

Equally important are the bill's civil provisions, which enhance survivors' ability to seek both equitable relief and damages.

H.626 creates a private right of action for victims of unlawful disclosure and voyeurism-related harms and explicitly allows courts to issue injunctive relief in the context of images and recordings obtained through voyeurism, including orders to stop the continued dissemination of those materials. In practice, this is one of the most urgent needs our clients have: stopping the ongoing harm. Monetary damages alone are insufficient when images continue to circulate.

The bill also allows plaintiffs to proceed under pseudonyms, an essential protection for survivors who may otherwise be deterred from filing due to fear of further exposure. This provision reflects a trauma-informed approach that we strongly support.

Additionally, the bill's allowance for claims to be brought at any time- and its retroactive application - further ensures that survivors are not shut out of the legal system due to timelines that do not reflect the realities of trauma or delayed discovery.

A Necessary and Timely Response

H.626 is not only a legal update; it is a recognition that technology has fundamentally changed the nature of harm. The rapid spread of digital content, the emergence of AI-generated imagery, and the permanence of online material have created new forms of abuse that demand equally modern legal responses.

For low-income Vermonters in particular, these harms can be especially difficult to escape. Limited access to resources, legal assistance, and technological tools can make it nearly impossible to address image-based abuse without strong statutory protections.

This bill provides those protections. It equips law enforcement with clearer tools, empowers survivors through meaningful civil remedies, and reflects a nuanced understanding of coercion, privacy, and trauma.



Conclusion

H.626 addresses real and recurring gaps in the law, aligns legal standards with lived experience, and offers practical tools to prevent and remedy serious harm.

We respectfully urge the Senate Committee on Judiciary to support H.626 and advance this important legislation.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We would be happy to provide further information or answer any questions.