

2023 TOWN MEETING REPORT

REP. MONIQUE PRIESTLEY • ORANGE-2: BRADFORD, FAIRLEE & WEST FAIRLEE



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To see my voting record, review bills, and watch floor debates and committee hearings, visit: legislature.vermont.gov

We're halfway through the 2023 legislative session! Our work officially began on January 4, when we returned for the first in-person opening week ceremonies in a few years. We've passed some significant legislation in these first two months, and this report provides highlights. Meanwhile, work on our key priorities will continue, across the House and in collaboration with the Senate, as we debate bills and consider investments prior to our anticipated May adjournment. It's an honor to serve as your state representative. Please reach out anytime with ideas, questions and concerns.

2023 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

The legislature will tackle a wide range of issues in 2023. While none of these challenges can be solved in a single session, our priorities include:

- Passing and maintaining a fiscally responsible, balanced state budget that reflects our values and priorities and supports Vermonters in all 14 counties.

- Tackling the complex and interconnected challenges of housing, workforce, and child care.
- Enacting forward-looking, inclusive strategies to combat climate change and transition to a sustainable way of life, as we implement a plan to achieve emissions reduction requirements as outlined in the Global Warming Solutions Act.
- Creating affordable housing stock for Vermont's working families and combatting homelessness statewide by modernizing zoning laws and increasing funding for construction.
- Supporting business stability and growth in all corners of Vermont, and increasing the capacity of our rural communities to access resources and plan for a vibrant future.

This is far from a comprehensive list. With 150 members and 13 standing committees, the House can accomplish a lot during our five months in Montpelier. And in all of this work, we'll center equity — thinking deeply and looking toward the future to enact legisla-

tion that protects the most vulnerable, boosts vitality in all 14 counties, and leaves no Vermonter behind.

AGRICULTURE, FOOD RESILIENCY & FORESTRY

Universal School Meals

During the pandemic, the federal government provided free school meals to all K-12 students. Last session, the legislature provided funding to continue offering universal school meals in Vermont for the current school year. The legislature must now determine the best path forward.

Universal school meals offer many benefits, including more predictability for schools in meal planning and purchasing, less stigma surrounding school meals, and increased opportunities for partnerships with local farms, leading to the re-entry of dollars into Vermont's economy. Several Vermont schools have applauded how the program has positively impacted health and behavioral outcomes and expanded nutrition and food education. If the state chooses to continue offering universal school meals, there will be new strategies in 2023 to access federal dollars in paying for the program—both through increased student participation and a new Medicaid eligibility criterion that automatically qualifies schools to receive more federal funds. To learn more, see H.165.

Organic Dairy Crisis

Organic dairy farms are facing the compounding effects of unprecedented production costs (including fuel and feed) due to the conflict in Ukraine, inflation, and a severe drought last summer. These farmers are smart, hard-working and diversifying their farms, yet they still struggle to stay financially viable because the increase in organic milk prices has not kept pace with conventional milk, and costs of production far exceed profits. Federal insurance programs, designed for conventional farmers, have not been able to adequately close this gap for many Vermont organic dairies. As a result, our state has lost over 30 of these farms since 2021. The House approved a one-time \$9.2 million appropriation for Vermont organic dairy farmers in the Budget Adjustment Act (H.145) to keep them solvent until new federal rules and policies provide a more level playing field. At town meeting time, this bill was still being negotiated by the House and Senate.

Burning Bans

The House passed bill H.161, relating to the issuance

of burn permits. This bill allows the Commissioner of Forests, Parks and Recreation to notify fire wardens that burning permits shall not be issued regionally or statewide during specified high-risk periods. Increased occurrences of drought and changing forest composition as a result of climate change make this legislation timely.

APPROPRIATIONS

Adjusting the FY23 Budget

Every year, we take up the annual Budget Adjustment Act (BAA), which is generally a “true-up” of the current fiscal year's budget. The bill also directs any additional and available funds to support one-time needs on priorities that cannot wait for the deliberations and passage of the next state fiscal year's budget. (Vermont's fiscal year runs from July 1 to June 30.)

The FY 2023 BAA (H.145) has been evaluated by both the House and Senate, and we expect to have the final bill in front of the Governor in the coming weeks. Highlights include additional investments in housing and supportive services, broadband that leverages federal grant funds, technical assistance for rural communities to access federal pandemic recovery and infrastructure funds, and IT improvements for the Vermont courts.

Building a Balanced Budget for FY24

The House is working on the next Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 budget, which covers state government and its community partner organizations from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024. The committee expects to present its proposed budget to the full House for discussion later in March. We are seeing substantial revenue growth this year, largely due to the impact of federal pandemic stimulus and recovery dollars. Our challenge is to make strategic use of one-time funds to meet state priorities. Those priorities include leveraging federal funds to support improvements in roads, bridges and other infrastructure needs under Congress' Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (passed last year). Other targeted statewide priorities are those that will deliver long-term dividends for Vermonters including investments in housing, broadband expansion, workforce training, clean energy and childcare. As is our Vermont tradition, it will be a balanced budget, even though Vermont does not have a statutory requirement to do so.

COMMERCE & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Building Vermont's Workforce

Workforce development continues to be a high priority for the legislature. With historic low unemployment in Vermont (2.6% as of December 2022), there is a desperate need for more trained, skilled workers in every sector, but especially those essential sectors including healthcare (nursing), construction and education (teachers). Developing and improving incentives and workforce training pipelines for these essential workers will prove critical. So far this year, the House Commerce Committee made revisions to the nurse preceptor grants program through the FY23 Budget Adjustment Act. Members of House Commerce are also serving on a cross-committee group to expand teacher retention and hiring incentives.

Improving Unemployment Insurance

Coming out of the pandemic and historic draws upon the state's unemployment insurance trust fund, it will take about 10 years for the fund to regain the level of solvency it held prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. With that in mind, multiple bills concerning the unemployment system are being carefully considered. H.55 would require all Vermont nonprofit employers to participate in the unemployment insurance program and would require nonprofit reimbursable employers to provide security for the potential cost of unemployment benefits through a bonding stipulation. Outreach to nonprofits would be handled by the Department of Labor in consultation with Common Good VT, the Vermont League of Cities and Towns and others, in coordination with the Secretary of State's office. H.92 would, in specific circumstances, enable unemployment insurance benefits to cover individuals who voluntarily separate from their employer, including when individuals obtain or recover from medical treatment, are escaping domestic or sexual violence, for those who are caring for a child following an unexpected loss of child care, or those caring for an ill or injured family member.

Boosting Business Incentives

House Commerce and Economic Development continues to take testimony on H.10 which would amend and extend the VEGI program, Vermont's Employment Growth Incentive program. VEGI is a funding vehicle for Vermont employers that monetarily incentivizes the creation of good jobs. This bill would extend the program's lifespan, as it is currently scheduled to sunset at the end of 2023. House Com-

merce is currently taking testimony on where the VEGI program should live in state government, how it should be governed, how incentives/awards for businesses should be calculated, and if the program should operate in correlation to state or regional unemployment levels.

CORRECTIONS & INSTITUTIONS

Funding Critical Infrastructure

The House Corrections & Institutions Committee is charged with passing the FY24/FY25 Capital Construction bill. This two-year bill authorizes the state to borrow bonded money to fund critical infrastructure projects, including the construction and maintenance of public buildings such as schools, state police barracks, correctional facilities, and state offices. By investing in infrastructure, the state creates jobs, provides essential public services, and spurs economic growth. The bill helps ensure that Vermont's buildings are safe, energy efficient, and accessible, supporting the health and well-being of its residents. This year's capital construction bill makes unprecedented investments in the future of the state and its residents. The capital bill has also historically used bonded dollars to fund a series of Building Communities grants, which directly benefit our cities and towns. These include: cultural facilities grants, historic barns and agriculture grants (a program that has preserved over 100 historic agricultural buildings), historic preservation grants (in partnership with the Preservation Trust of Vermont), recreational facilities grants program, and regional economic development grants to name a few.

Vermont's Clean Water Fund

Vermont's Clean Water Fund provides a dedicated source of funding for water quality projects that aim to reduce pollution in the state's lakes, rivers, and streams. The fund provides grants and loans to municipalities, farmers, and other organizations to support projects that improve water quality, such as upgrading wastewater treatment plants, planting vegetative buffers along waterways, and implementing agricultural best management practices. The Clean Water Fund is a critical tool in Vermont's efforts to restore and protect the health of its water resources.

The revenues for Vermont's Clean Water Fund come from a variety of sources, including state and federal funds, as well as fees on property transfers and on the sales of fertilizer and pesticides. These fees are designed to generate revenue from activities that

contribute to water pollution, and the funds are then used to support projects that improve water quality throughout the state. Beyond supporting water quality, the Clean Water Fund has also been used to support projects that promote soil health and reduce erosion. These projects include practices such as cover cropping, conservation tillage, and nutrient management, which not only reduce water pollution but also help farmers maintain healthy soils and increase the productivity of their farms.

Vermont's Drinking Water Fund

Vermont's Drinking Water Fund provides a dedicated source of funding for improving the safety and quality of drinking water in the state. The fund provides grants and loans to public water systems to help finance projects that improve the safety and quality of drinking water, such as upgrading treatment plants, replacing aging infrastructure, and improving distribution systems. The Drinking Water Fund is an essential tool in ensuring that all Vermont residents have access to safe and reliable drinking water, which is vital for public health and well-being. With the help of the Drinking Water Fund, Vermont can continue to make progress in addressing the challenges and needs of its public water systems. In addition to supporting water quality, the Vermont Drinking Water Fund has also supported efforts to address lead in drinking water. In recent years, the fund has provided grants to help public water systems replace lead service lines and install treatment systems to reduce lead levels in drinking water. This is an important public health issue, as lead exposure can have serious long-term health effects, especially for young children.

EDUCATION

Addressing School Construction Needs

The House Education committee is considering options to address the statewide backlog of renovation needs or replacement of school buildings. Prior to the financial downturn of 2007-08, Vermont had a policy of the state contributing 30% of the cost of a school construction project. A moratorium was implemented in 2007, and Vermont is now the only New England state without an active program of state assistance for school construction. A statewide assessment of school facilities is currently underway with a completion deadline of October 2023.

The committee is considering school construction models being used in Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Wyoming. Given Vermont's small, most-

ly rural population, the RIDE (Rhode Island Department of Education) School Construction Program is likely the closest fit. The Rhode Island rubric provides a minimum state match of 35%, with certain projects being eligible for greater state-level support. Once projects are completed, districts are required to spend 3% of their budget annually on maintenance. The Education Committee is considering how to move forward with a similar program that includes a non-partisan commission to develop a formula to allocate any state contribution to a school construction project. The Treasurer has also expressed a strong interest in this area and will be a key partner in figuring out initial funding options.

Supporting Student Mental Health

A significant issue before the Education committee is how to best support youth mental health across the state and to strengthen the ability of schools and mental health agencies to address these critical needs. Currently, Vermont school communities are experiencing a very high level of mental health needs and encountering capacity challenges in meeting the current demand for services. In part this is a question of limited financial resources, particularly as federal dollars begin to dry up. But it is even more an issue of workforce shortages.

There will be no short-term solutions to this problem, but ideas for progress the committee is studying include: increased funding to mental health agencies, incentives to enter the mental health field, decreased barriers to licensure, expanding programs through the Community College of Vermont and the University of Vermont that allow workers to "upskill" into the mental health professions.

Public Tuition to Approved Independent Schools

Vermont has a long history of using public tuition dollars to send students to approved independent (private) schools or public schools of their choosing if their district does not operate a school or does not operate all grade levels. Recent legal developments have re-focused attention on the current system in Vermont, including which schools receive public tuition dollars, the nature of state oversight of these institutions, and equity around student access and educational quality. There is a desire to ensure that no independent school receiving public dollars is discriminating against students or employees, and to guarantee that there is a strong level of oversight of student progress and educational quality for publicly supported students attending approved independent schools. The committee is considering leg-

isolation that attempts to strike a balance between funding realities, legal precedent, proper oversight of public dollars, long standing relationships with community schools, and a desire to best serve Vermont students, school professionals, and communities.

Approaches under consideration include requiring school districts to designate up to three public schools and/or one of the state's "historic academies" in St. Johnsbury, Manchester, Thetford, and Lyndonville, limiting public tuition dollars to approved schools within 25 miles of Vermont, requiring any independent school receiving public dollars to be accredited by one of two major accrediting organizations operating in New England, and ensuring that any school receiving public tuition dollars is following applicable state anti-discrimination laws and policies.

ENVIRONMENT & ENERGY

Climate Action: Conservation & Resilience

As the climate changes, strategic conservation of land and water has become increasingly urgent to protect biodiversity and ensure continued ecological and economic benefits from a resilient and connected landscape. Vermont's wetlands, shorelands, and forests are home to all manner of wildlife, recreation, and working lands. While we have robust conservation science, tools, and partners, more planning is needed to guide future conservation efforts and resources and meet the conservation goals called for in the state's Climate Action Plan.

The legislature's "30x30" bill, H.126, requires the Agency of Natural Resources to develop a plan to permanently conserve 30% of our landscape by 2030 and 50% by 2050. Currently, roughly 26 percent of Vermont is conserved in a way that aligns with this bill. More than 100 countries, including the United States, have signed onto 30x30 goals. Three categories of conservation are defined in the bill, ranging from working lands to passively managed lands for old forest. To chart a path for accomplishing these goals, the Agency of Natural Resources will direct a planning process that includes broad input from regional and local entities as well as an updated inventory of conserved lands.

Targeting Toxins

Hundreds of everyday household products stored under the sink and in our garages contain hazardous toxins that require special handling and disposal. Our local solid waste districts collect these products at

events held throughout the state at least twice a year. Despite these efforts, hundreds of tons of this waste end up in the trash, where it presents a danger to waste handlers, before ending up in our state's one landfill. Once in the landfill, toxins escape into our soil and water. The other bad news is that the costs for processing these wastes are spiking, and there's growing consensus that the industrial producers of these products should be shouldering disposal costs instead of taxpayers.

H.67 requires the manufacturers of household products that contain hazardous substances to belong to a program that would pay for collection and disposal as well as more public outreach and education. Similar programs already exist for paint, batteries and electronics, successfully reducing the amounts of such wastes from ending up in our landfill. [Learn more here.](#)

Bottle Bill 2.0

Updating and expanding Vermont's bottle bill — first enacted in 1972 — will help reduce landfill waste, litter, and greenhouse gas emissions by increasing the amount and quality of plastic, aluminum and glass recycling. Although Vermont has a high recycling rate thanks to the universal recycling law, returnable bottles and cans dropped off at redemption centers around the state produce more marketable and reusable materials than what gets tossed into our commingled recycling bins. As the number and variety of beverages has exploded over the years, H.158 proposes a needed expansion of the decades-old deposit system to cover most beverages, including plastic water bottles and glass wine bottles. To fund more conveniently located redemption centers, provide fair compensation to redemption center owners, and keep an increasing number of bottles and cans out of the landfill each year, the bill requires that beverage manufacturers and distributors collaborate in a stewardship program overseen by the Agency of Natural Resources that will address the limits of the current system.

GENERAL & HOUSING

Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance

This year's version of Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance, H.66, as recently passed out of the General & Housing Committee, is very different from the bill passed in the House three years ago. H.66 contains three main provisions of equal importance: total job protection, benefits that include 100% pay for those earning the state average wage, and ample

leave time. Significantly, this year's proposed benefit is portable; it follows the employee rather than remaining with the employer.

Paid leave covers varying periods of leave time for an employee or family member's serious health conditions, or recovery from serious health conditions (including rehabilitation); miscarriage; residential treatment for substance use disorder; childbirth and child bonding; military exigency, which allows a servicemember or their family to prepare for active duty or call to active duty; and bereavement (with a separate amount of time for those administering an estate). The bill also covers "safe leave" for medical care, counseling, or social or legal services, when an employee or family member is a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

Importantly, the bill also extends the definition of "family" to be far more robust and contemporary. The definition now includes individuals with whom a person's everyday life is closely bound: "any other individual with whom the employee has a significant personal bond that is or is like a family relationship, regardless of biological or legal relationship under the totality of the circumstances surrounding the relationship."

Under the bill, employers and employees would share the insurance premium costs to provide paid leave benefits equally through small payroll contributions, ensuring a valuable benefit at a low predictable cost to employers. Initially, employers (including small businesses) would pay less than 0.27% of wages, up to a cap. The bill is currently under consideration in the House Ways & Means committee.

Vermont Housing Improvement Program

The 2020 Re-Housing Recovery Program to rehab vacant and blighted apartments was originally envisioned as a one-time-budget program funded through the CARES Act. Its success in bringing 240 units back onto the low-income rental market in one year exceeded expectations, and as a result the program has become a more stable and expansive feature of Vermont's housing solutions portfolio.

The Vermont Housing Improvement Program (VHIP) offers grants of up to \$50,000 (depending on the size of the unit) that allow property owners to invest 20% of their own money to make necessary repairs and upgrades to vacant apartments to return them to the rental housing market. By employing the expertise of housing services providers, units are then reserved for low-income renters or those exiting homelessness at a rate below fair market rental rates (or at the

rate of a housing voucher) for a period of five years.

After the success of VHIP became clear, another feature was added: money for the addition of secondary units. These can be detached accessory dwelling units (ADUs) or attached apartment units added to previously existing rentals. In each of these circumstances, the dwellings must be ancillary; completed units may be rented to anyone qualifying for the lowered rental rates. More innovations will likely be added to the VHIP program in the future.

GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS & MILITARY AFFAIRS

Online Sports Wagering

Legal online sports wagering is making its way through the legislative process (H.127). Why would Vermont make online sports wagering legal? The main reasons: consumer protection and capturing revenue that's currently going to the illegal sports betting market. Vermonters are already betting on sports with their phones and computers; they often travel to surrounding states (it's legal in all of our neighboring states and Quebec) to place their bets, or they use illegal gambling sites. If a Vermonter bets through an illegal site and their money is stolen or their identity is compromised, there is no legal recourse. Regulating the industry will protect consumers and bring illegal behavior into a safer, legal space.

Reducing the harm caused by problem gambling is a priority in H.127. A portion of the revenue from online sports wagering will be used to make a more robust investment in treatment and support for problem gambling through the Department of Mental Health. The current program that was initiated to support the Vermont Lottery is underused; improving it will help Vermonters suffering from problem gambling.

Within the bill, there are multiple responsible gambling requirements that licensed operators must provide, like the ability for bettors to set wager limits or exclude themselves from gambling activity for a period of time that ranges from days to permanent exclusion. H.127 also prohibits sports bettors from using credit cards to place wagers.

The bill under consideration applies only to online and mobile sports wagering and doesn't include any physical gambling locations. The Department of Liquor and Lottery will license and regulate between two and six sports betting operators through a bid process if H.127 becomes law.

Sheriffs and Law Enforcement

Vermont sheriffs in several counties have recently experienced multiple financial scandals and even criminal charges brought against them. We are actively working on training and accountability updates in two bills related to the Vermont Criminal Justice Council which is responsible for certifying all law enforcement officers in Vermont. A Senate bill, S.17, looks at the laws regarding bonus policies as well as hiring and termination policies for Vermont sheriffs.

The legislature has very little power to hold sheriffs responsible for misconduct, absent impeachment proceedings or a constitutional amendment. We expect that a proposal to amend the state constitution to provide the legislature with the power to require professional certification and financial regulation and oversight of sheriffs will pass the Senate this year, but will take 4-5 years to go into effect.

We're also working on a bill to address incidents of domestic violence perpetrated by law enforcement, to encourage law enforcement officers to report domestic violence, and to make sure that a final relief from protection order is appropriately handled by law enforcement agencies and departments.

Finally, the House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs is considering recommendations from the VCJC to update training requirements for fair and impartial policing and impaired driving enforcement. This bill would also require police departments to check a candidate's entire employment history, not just the past two places of employment as currently required. It also clarifies that data collected during a traffic stop needs to include time, date, and location data as well as the race, age, gender and other data that is already reported.

Updating our Election Laws

The Committee on Government Operations & Military Affairs is working on a miscellaneous elections bill that seeks to make voting as easy, transparent, and accessible as possible. The bill will allow secure electronic return of ballots for voters with disabilities as well as overseas military personnel. Currently these ballots can be sent, but not returned, electronically, and this keeps many military personnel from being able to return a ballot in time for it to be counted every election.

The "Sore Loser Law" provision in the bill prohibits candidates who lose a major party primary from running in the general election, and it raises the threshold of votes required for a primary winner to get a second party nomination listed on the general elec-

tion ballot.

HEALTH CARE

Expanding and Enhancing our Health Care Workforce through Interstate Licensure Compacts

Vermont's health care workforce and our state's residents stand to benefit from three bills that are moving through the legislature. A licensure compact is a mutual agreement that allows a health care provider to work, via telehealth or in-person, in any of the member states with a professional license issued by their home state. Without these compacts, a health care provider would have to undergo the costly and time-consuming process of receiving a separate license in each state where they intend to treat patients. The bills recently advanced in the House Health Care Committee will allow mental health counselors (H.62), physical therapists (H.77), and audiologists and speech-language pathologists (H.86) in Vermont to join existing multi-state licensure compacts for their respective professions.

These compacts will allow our providers to help patients in many other states, and they will be able to maintain relationships with those who happen to move away from Vermont while undergoing treatment. For our state's patients in need, these compacts will allow them to receive treatment from the thousands of providers in other compact member states. Notably, New Hampshire is already a member of these three compacts. The bills are now in House Appropriations.

Suicide Prevention

In preparation for crafting suicide prevention bills, we were privileged to hear from some of the bravest and most sincere witnesses — family members of those irreplaceable Vermonters lost through suicide, in addition to experts and academics who study this tragic phenomenon. The facts are heartbreaking: More than 700 Vermont residents died of gunshot wounds in the decade from 2011 to 2020. 88% of these deaths were suicides. Children are 4.4 times more likely to die by suicide in a home with a firearm compared to a home without a firearm. Suicide among Vermont men and boys is 50% higher than the national average. Persons at greatest risk of suicide in Vermont are men, persons living in rural areas, persons with a disability, veterans, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. There are few bright spots in the statistics, but one is this: 90% of the people who attempt a suicide, and survive, do not try again. Suicide by firearm almost never allows this opportunity

for a second chance at life.

H.230 attempts to reduce suicide by lethal means with three distinct strategies. One, mandating the safe storage of firearms in places where they might be accessed by children and those legally ineligible to possess them. Two, instituting a mandatory waiting period for the purchase of firearms. Most suicides are impulsive acts, and having a bit of time to cool off will save lives. Three, extension of our current extreme risk protection order law to include family members. Following the work on H.230, the committee will focus on additional suicide prevention methods.

HUMAN SERVICES

Protecting Vulnerable Adults

The law investigating alleged abuse, neglect, and exploitation of vulnerable adults has not been updated in nearly 50 years. The Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living has been working with an advisory committee for several years to propose comprehensive changes to this law.

H.171 protects vulnerable adults whose health and welfare may be adversely affected by abuse, neglect, or exploitation. This legislation modernizes our current 50-year-old law to strengthen protections for vulnerable adults, focus on victims' rights, and provide a path for restitution for families and victims. The bill also improves the range and scope of behavior covered as financial exploitation. The legislation creates two tracks for alleged abuse, neglect, or exploitation reports, one for an "assessment" and one for a full investigation, leading to greater flexibility in redressing harm through protective measures and restorative justice. The Human Services Committee is in the final stages of work on this important bill.

Reducing Overdoses

Over the past several years, Vermont has experienced record-breaking rates of fatal overdoses due to disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased prevalence of fentanyl. H.222 is an omnibus overdose response bill with bipartisan support that seeks to reverse the trend of fatal overdoses, and it is only one step in our ongoing work to strengthen access to life-saving services in Vermont's communities.

Vermont has a considerable need for recovery housing. H.222 will allow a recovery house with 8 or less beds to be permitted as a single family home, which will remove current zoning barriers and increase the

number of recovery houses across the state. This change aligns recovery house zoning with what is currently permitted for group homes serving people with disabilities. The bill also removes barriers to treatment for Vermonters who are Medicaid beneficiaries by streamlining the process for getting prescriptions. Statewide access to syringe disposal and legal protections for Vermont's syringe service providers are also increased in this legislation. H.222 also modernizes Vermont's laws on Naloxone (Narcan) to support innovative ways for people to access this life-saving medication. Finally, this legislation makes permanent Act 46 of 2021, which removes the criminal penalties for possession of a personal use amount of buprenorphine.

Child Care and Early Childhood Education

The lack of affordable, high-quality early childhood education profoundly impacts Vermont and its economy. As introduced, H. 208, an act relating to child care and early childhood education, develops a blueprint for a significant investment in our children, families, and communities. The bill would significantly increase state-funded financial assistance for children in child care; expand the current funding for part-time pre-K to a full-time program for all 4-year-olds in Vermont; increase compensation for early childhood educators and financial support for community and home-based child care programs by reimbursing centers for enrollment; and elevate and streamline state-level oversight of early childhood education.

The proposed legislation has support from over 90 representatives across party lines and builds on the current system to ensure that all partners, families, schools, child care providers, and early educators, have the resources and support they need to best care for our youngest Vermonters.

In developing this bill, legislators considered recommendations presented in the recently released Child Care and Early Childhood Education Systems Analysis and the RAND Corporation's Vermont Early Care and Education and Financing Study commissioned by Act 45 of 2021. Work on this topic is well underway in the Senate, and the House Human Services Committee is looking forward to taking up this critical legislation later in March. We will hear testimony from parents, child care providers, schools, employers, early educators, state agencies, and essential stakeholders.

JUDICIARY

Addressing Domestic and Sexual Violence

Data from the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence shows that more than 40,000 Vermonters experience domestic or sexual violence (DV/SV) every year. There is a strong desire in the legislature to protect more Vermonters and better address the full spectrum of violence. To that end, the House Judiciary Committee has worked on multiple bills related to DV/SV since the session began in January. One example of this work is H.45, which passed the House and is now under consideration in the Senate. H.45 limits a convicted abuser's ability to use the court system to continue harming a survivor via frequent filing of motions or complaints that the survivor of domestic violence, stalking, or sexual assault then needs to answer – costing them money, work time, and any sense of actual safety or distance from their abuser. Abusive litigation is also a drain on the court's very limited resources.

Another bill which recently passed the House is H.41 which allows community justice centers (CJCs) to receive referrals of DV/SV cases under specific conditions. As many as 80% of victims never report their abuse, sometimes because they fear the typical criminal justice process. Opening the door to a restorative justice approach, which is entirely victim-centered and focused on repairing harm, may lead more victims to seek relief.

The Judiciary Committee is also working on H.148, a bill which bans child marriage. Vermonters who marry younger than 18 years old (89% of whom are girls) are more likely to be abused by their spouse and are at higher risk for a host of physical and mental health challenges. Because marriage is a legal contract, this bill aligns with Vermont's stance that children cannot enter into a legally binding contract.

Protecting Health Care Providers and Patients

H.89 – also known as the Shield Bill – provides protections for patients and providers from prosecutions and investigations by states that have banned or restricted reproductive and gender-affirming care that is legal in Vermont. It also provides some protections for out-of-state patients receiving this care from Vermont providers.

The Shield Bill reinforces the legislature's ongoing efforts to protect safe access to reproductive and gender affirming care for Vermonters at a time when these essential and personal health care choices are under attack in many states across the country. With

the passage of Proposition 5 in November, Vermonters overwhelmingly demonstrated their support for enshrining reproductive liberty as a constitutional right. The legislature has also recognized the right to gender-affirming health care and stated a commitment to ensuring that transgender youth and their families are safe to make the best decisions for themselves, in consultation with their health care providers.

Driver's License Suspensions

There are a number of reasons that a Vermonter may have their driver's license suspended. H.53 eliminates one money-related reason, which is a failure to pay civil fees assessed for moving violations. Drivers would still receive points on their license and would be expected to pay fines, but they would not face the penalty of a suspended license – and the subsequent inability to drive to work – if they did not pay those fees and fines within 30 days. The state has a variety of ways to collect the money due, and this law would not change that. This bill is designed to avoid criminalizing poverty while still holding drivers accountable through other means.

TRANSPORTATION

Transformational Investments in Transportation

This year's Transportation Bill — nicknamed the T-Bill — will provide more than \$850 million in funding for transportation policies that go beyond the basics of road maintenance, upgrades, and snow removal. The House will recommend using these funds to support transportation greenhouse gas reductions, bike and pedestrian infrastructure, and public transportation that serves both urban and rural communities. We will continue to take advantage of the unprecedented federal funding made available through the bipartisan Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act (IIJA). These funds, which will total \$1.6B over five years, provide Vermont the opportunity to make transformational investments in our transportation infrastructure and to address climate change.

Addressing Climate Change in Our Transportation Sector

The issue of climate change, and what we can do to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, is one of the most pressing challenges facing us today. Over 40% of Vermont's carbon emissions come from our transportation sector. This year's transportation bill will continue to make significant investments in policies to help Vermonters transition to more fuel-efficient

vehicles, including all-electric vehicles. Additionally, the T-Bill invests in public transportation and infrastructure that supports more walking, biking, and public transit options throughout the state. As recommended in Vermont's Climate Action Plan, the primary goal is to electrify our transportation system to meet our mandated climate goals.

Using \$21 million available over 5 years from the federal Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act (IIJA), the T-Bill will continue significant investments in electric vehicles (EVs) and plug-in hybrids through purchase incentives. These incentives are income sensitive to ensure all Vermonters can afford to buy new or used low-or zero-emission vehicles. Additionally, the T-bill uses federal funding to expand our EV charging infrastructure to ensure that everyone, including those who rent or live in multi-family units, has a place to plug in their car.

Transportation Plans for Vibrant Communities

Within a community, a local transportation plan can improve life for residents, increase health and social equity, and revitalize local economies. Vermont's historic village and downtown centers provide "great bones" for walkable compact lifestyles. The transportation bill includes funding for the Downtown Transportation Fund (DTF) and the Better Connections Program. The DTF supports revitalization efforts in designated downtowns and village centers by making these areas more pedestrian, bike, and transit friendly. This competitive grant program is administered by the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development and provides awards up to \$200,000 which also require a 20% match by the community. Communities ready to develop a broad community vision are encouraged to apply for a Better Connections grant which provides technical assistance and planning funds to communities to help align transportation and smart growth policies. Additional resources available to communities seeking to improve livability, walkability, safety, economic vitality, and community vibrancy include Animating Infrastructure grants through the Vermont Arts Council and the Better Places Program through the Agency of Commerce and Community Development.

WAYS & MEANS

Your Taxes: How They Work for You

The Ways & Means Committee works very hard to ensure that taxes are set appropriately. We do so by creating an overall system that taxes those with few resources less, and those with more resourc-

es more — a principle known as progressivity. Vermont's tax system is one of the most progressive in the nation, and we always consider our actions in the light of overall burden and overall opportunity. Last biennium we passed a historic child tax credit and increased our earned income tax credit and child and dependent care credit. It's important to take advantage of these new opportunities.

One great resource is the Taxpayer Advocate, an independent entity within the Tax Department, tasked with ensuring that you are treated fairly and that you understand your rights. For Vermonters who struggle with tax issues and cannot afford outside tax preparation, Vermont Legal Aid provides a statewide Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic. They also assist people with limited English skills. Learn more: <https://vt-lawhelp.org/taxes>. We also fund a series of Volunteer Tax Clinics statewide through our community action agencies, find your closest option here: <https://irs.treasury.gov/freetaxprep>

The Ways & Means Committee

The work of the Ways & Means Committee is to raise revenue to support the functions of government. This year, we're anticipating some complex and interesting bills to come across our desks. We will work with our colleagues to ensure that we raise revenue equitably to improve the lives of Vermonters. Some highlights of this legislative session include Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance, Universal School Meals, and Affordable, Accessible Childcare.

Education Funding and Property Appraisals

Vermonters all know how much the real estate market has fluctuated in recent years — it's fair to say the rise in property values has been historic. The Committee on Ways & Means has spent the first few months of this legislative session looking at a wide range of ways to bring this system into alignment. The committee heard testimony on innovative solutions including: moving away from funding education with property taxes, and moving to a consistent statewide system for property appraisals. The intent of a more consistent system is to avoid large changes in values that catch property owners by surprise, and to relieve pressure on municipalities to manage appraisals with limited resources. The committee is also looking at ways to recategorize non-homestead property values to get a better sense of how these properties are used. Currently the non-homestead property category includes everything from second homes to businesses to industrial use.